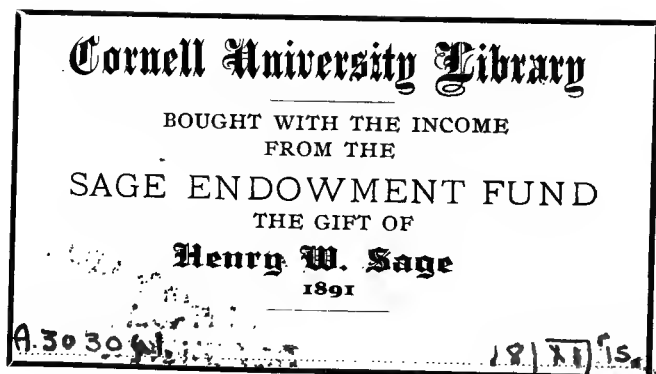
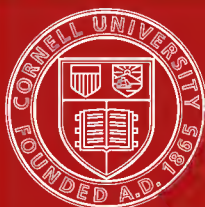




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REMINISCENCES OF A DRAMATIC CRITIC

WITH AN ESSAY ON THE ART
OF HENRY IRVING

BY

HENRY AUSTIN CLAPP

"Forsan et hæc olim meminisse juvabit."



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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To F. C. C.

NOTE

THE reader is informed of what he may discover for himself, — that these reminiscences are not exhaustive in any sense of the adjective, and do not profess to present the history of the theatre in the United States during the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. Nearly all the artists commented on are dead; but not all the famous actors deceased within the writer's time are mentioned, even by name. The author has chronicled merely those recollections which, for any reason or no reason, have remained most vivid in his memory.

H. A. C.

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REMINISCENCES OF A DRAMATIC CRITIC

I

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

THE critic who presumes to write his reminiscences, and therefore to invite the implication that he belongs to the past rather than to the present, may find many a coigne o' vantage in his position when he comes to hold it with pen and ink against the public. He is not required to practice much self-restraint : garrulity is expected, if not desired, of him, as "part of his defect ;" nobody will disrelish his memoirs if their occasional flavor is a pleasant sour ; and in dealing with dramatic artists — at least with those who are dead or otherwise gone — he will be allowed free play for the knife of his criticism. Moreover, he is in a situation

of rare and novel privilege in respect of his pronouns ; no need here to periphrase with neuters and passives, or to masquerade in the mock ermine of the editorial "we," since there is no reason why every one of his pages should not be as full of *I*'s before and behind as any Apocalyptic Beast.

I must forewarn my readers, however, that I can furnish them with few of those intimate details concerning actors, authors, and managers, which are relished *semper, ubique, et ab omnibus*, even the cultivated and fastidious. My narrative will be reduced in value by reason of this deficiency. After gossip has been allowed to stand for a few years, it usually rids itself of its pernicious bacteria, and becomes a wholesome as well as sprightly beverage. The qualities of Master Samuel Pepys which made him a dangerous neighbor in 1670 make him a valuable historian in 1901. But it has seemed best to me, partly because actors are a very sensitive

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and fascinating folk, to deny myself the pleasure of their intimate acquaintance, as a rule, in the hope that my head might neither be quite turned nor much deflected from a true level. Many of my confrères have pursued a contrary policy with impressive success, I am aware ; and I concede that, as a critic, I have sometimes lost, as well as sometimes gained, through my lack of personal contact with dramatic artists. My readers must enjoy my reminiscences, if they enjoy them at all, as a series of reconsiderations of the plays and players of the past, from the point of view of a disinterested citizen or public censor. There ought to be some pleasure, and some profit, also, for all of us in such a review, since it may be made calmly, through an atmosphere cleared by reflection, from a distance which permits the observer to see things in perspective, and to judge truly of their relative sizes and proportions.

It was about thirty years ago that I took

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the place of critic of the drama for the Boston Daily Advertiser. My first service was rendered when that newspaper had for its editors two remarkable men, to whom I can pay at this moment hardly any other tribute than to mention them by name. The assistant, George Bryant Woods, the most precociously brilliant person I ever knew, died in 1871, in his twenty-seventh year ; having won distinction as a critic of literature and the theatre, as a special correspondent, as a raconteur of short stories, and as a writer of leaders upon nearly all current topics. The editor in chief, Charles Franklin Dunbar, who passed away only a few months ago, senior professor of political economy at Harvard, and ripe in years and honors, was a man of great wisdom, force, and acumen, and the master of a style which, for point, power, and purity, has been surpassed by that of scarcely any American journalist of our day.

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My equipment for my task may be indicated in a very brief paragraph. From a child I had been interested in the theatre and a reader of dramatic literature. I had been a student of Shakespeare for many years, having received my first impetus toward the great poet from the accomplished Mr. now Dr. William J. Rolfe, when he was head master and I a pupil of the Dorchester High School. I had seen a good deal of acting, and had tried my 'prentice hand at commenting upon it under my superiors on the paper. I brought to my work an unaffected eagerness and intensity of interest, which have not flagged to this day. I may add that I had an exalted idea of the importance of my office, and of the awfulness of my responsibility to the theatre, to the theatrical profession, to Art spelled with a very large initial A, to the readers of the Advertiser in particular, and to the entire Community in general. There is something comical in this statement, and

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perhaps it is, therefore, well that I should tack on to its retrospective magniloquence the assertion — obviously superfluous and, in the absence of challenge, a bit suspicious — that I meant to be fair and just, to the extent of my ability.

II

SPECTACLE, FARCE, MELODRAMA, AND MINSTRELSY FIFTY YEARS AGO

A PART of my stock in trade, of course, was my theatrical experience, which dated from my seeing the Viennese children at the Boston Museum when I was eight years of age. Then followed, at great yawning, heart-straining intervals of time, the fairy plays which were "features" at that theatre for a series of years. I recall my ecstasy in witnessing these dramas, in order that my contemporaries may reglow and rethrill with me over the reminiscence. It is of no use to tell me, to tell any of *us*, that children enjoy themselves as much at the theatrical shows of to-day as we enjoyed ourselves at the plays of *circa* 1850. And I

hold to my opinion, not only or chiefly because modern children are as *blasés* and skeptical as everybody else knows and they themselves frankly concede them to be, but because there is almost no provision made for them in modern American theatres. For aught I know, the Christmas pantomime still lingers in Great Britain. But to-day, in this land,—is it not curious?—adults are so greedy of the theatre that they have practically crowded children out of places of theatrical amusement. There are no Arabian Nights entertainments or “fairy plays” provided now as incidents of the theatric year, aimed directly at the eyes and hearts of ingenuous childhood. Our children participate in formulated æsthetic shows occasionally, clad in correct costumes, doing appropriate dances; and some of them, when they have attained their teens, are taken to see innocuous comedies, revived at the Castle Square Theatre from long desuetude.

THE STAGE FIFTY YEARS AGO

But what do any of them know of the wild joys which thrilled our little breasts when *The Enchanted Horse*, *The Enchanted Beauty*, *The Forty Thieves*, *The Children of Cyprus*, and *Aladdin* possessed the fairyland of the stage? I recall perfectly, and can now analyze, the mixed conditions of my spirit at those entertainments. All was real and true, just because it was far away and romantic. The "cloud-cuckoo-land" of the imagination was the native heath of the healthy child of that day. And well I remember how tame, unimportant, and unnatural the characters appeared to me in *The Drunkard*, — to which I was taken for ethical reasons, no doubt, when it was produced at the Museum, — in contrast with the glorious, vital, and convincing figures of Ali Baba, Cogia Houssam, and Morgiana, of *Cherry and Fair Star*, so done into English from the French *Chéri* and *Belle Etoile*. It was in *The Children of Cyprus* that I first saw

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and heard Adelaide Phillipps, a young girl and a novice, but wonderfully easy and melodious in the garnish of the boy hero, Cherry ; and in *The Forty Thieves* I had my first view of William Warren, who impersonated Mustapha, the cheerful cobbler, whose delicate professional job it was to sew together the severed sections of a human trunk.

Only a little later *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was dramatized, and took possession of the stage in the Northern States. The theatre, which never recognizes or sees any public movement that is not on the surface of the life of the community, had not dreamed of the great anti-slavery sentiment which had been growing like the substance of an avalanche for twenty years. The only slaves known to the stage had been the sprightly young darky, nimble in jig and breakdown, and the ragged, obese old grayhead, exuberant of and as to ham and 'possum fat ; and both these colored

THE STAGE FIFTY YEARS AGO

men had celebrated, in songs and dances set to the foot-tilting banjo, their perfect happiness on "de ole plantation." And then, as in a moment, like lightning from a supposedly clear sky, Uncle Tom's Cabin descended upon the boards, and they instantly and eloquently echoed the woes and wrongs of the oppressed. I strongly suspect that the play was quite unworthy of the novel ; but the humor, fire, and passion of the story swept everything before them. Mr. Warren appeared at the Museum performance of the drama in a character, interpolated chiefly for purposes of farcical mirth, entitled Penetrate Partyside, — a cool, shrewd Yankee, with advanced political opinions concerning "the peculiar institution," — and this part was played by the comedian two hundred and forty-eight times ; leading, in frequency of performance, all the other characters in his vast repertory, even to the hour of his retirement from the stage. Mr. Frank Whit-

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man, an actor with a natural touch and a gift in pathos, was Uncle Tom when I saw the play ; Miss Gaszynski, who had been doing *pas seuls* and other dances between pieces, and had been promoted to be Topsy, made a remarkable hit, and was said to have won a desirable husband by the eccentric drollery of her impersonation ; and Mrs. Vincent, then a slim and swift young woman, was a flaming and, by the familiar law of nerve calorics, blood-chilling Cassy. It is worth noting that the playwright did not then dare to risk the popularity of his work by repeating the final tragedy of the novel, and that the drama closed with the rescue of Uncle Tom by George Shelby from the murderous hands of Legree. Through all the curious fluctuations in public taste during fifty years, the play keeps the stage to this day, having suffered shameful misuse in some quarters, and depending upon packs of real bloodhounds, and upon "star combinations"

THE STAGE FIFTY YEARS AGO

with two Evas, two Topsyies, two Uncle Toms, and the like.

At the time of which I am writing farces were greatly in vogue, and, indeed, were favorite side dishes upon theatrical bills of fare during the entire half century which ended with 1880. They had a definite place in the dramatic literature of the period, and may be said to have constituted an order or variety of that literature. Some of them, such as *Lend Me Five Shillings*, which Mr. Jefferson yet plays, *To Paris and Back for Five Pounds*, and *A Phenomenon in a Smock Frock*, were obvious and confessed translations from the French ; and scores of others were stolen from Parisian playwrights, the marvelously fertile Augustin Eugène Scribe being the prime source of supply. But the English adaptations were of remarkable freedom and force, and often took on a flavor of their own which gave them almost the quality and value of original works. Box

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and Cox, and Poor Pillicoddy, are good examples in this kind.

I find it hard to account for the almost complete extinction of this sort of play ; or rather, for its relegation to the "amateur stage." The faults of the farces are and were obvious. They treated life with a certain bluntness and abruptness, and sometimes were coarse in a frank, quasi-Elizabethan fashion. But the best of them not only effervesced, overflowed, crackled, and scintillated with humor and wit, but also displayed common human faults and failings, sometimes the usual *contretemps* of existence, with delightful vividness and shrewdness. In some the fun began with the first word, and did not fail till the curtain fell. They were invariably good-natured. The most striking of them proceeded upon a perfectly formulated theory of presenting familiar weaknesses in the mode of true caricature ; that is to say, by comical exaggeration, always on the lines

THE STAGE FIFTY YEARS AGO

of the truth of life. As long as they were played they provoked an immense amount of wholesome and happy laughter. The most serious actors—even the leaders of the Booth family—did not disdain to appear in them, and the greatest comedians of the nineteenth century—Blake, Burton, Clarke, Owens, Gilbert, Warren, and the Mathewses—were largely known to fame through the impersonation of the best farcical characters. At William Warren's famous "benefits,"—of which there were four per annum for many years in the Boston Museum,—a programme which had not at least one farce was seldom presented ; and I recall some of that comedian's "benefit" nights in which the bill consisted merely of five farces.

The king of the English writers or adapters of these dramas was John Madison Morton, and somewhat below him were J. B. Buckstone and T. J. Williams. Morton's Box and Cox, Betsy

Baker, Poor Pillicoddy, and A Regular Fix and Williams's Ici On Parle Français, deserve, I am sure, a narrow little niche, into which they can be squeezed together, in the Temple of Fame. The most famous passage in the first of these pieces is worthy of Plautus:—

“*Box.* Ah, tell me, in mercy tell me: have you a strawberry mark on your left arm?

“*Cox.* No.

“*Box.* Then it is he,—my long-lost brother.”

And Jane Austen herself—she of the pretty taste in fools, and the unsurpassed gift of producing them in her novels—would have rejoiced to make the acquaintance of the ineffable Mrs. Toodles, who bought an inscribed doorplate at an auction, because (to quote her words to her husband) “we may have a daughter, and that daughter may be a female and live to the age of maturity, and she may marry

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a man of the name of Thompson, — with a P, — and then how handy it will be to have it in the house!”

At the time when my service as dramatic critic began, the negro minstrel show, descended, with some crossing of the stock, from Christy's Minstrels of New York and Ordway's Æolian Vocalists of Boston, was in a failing condition. I mean, of course, the entertainment of that order which was fixed “in residence,” as Shakespeare would say, and accepted as a constant and necessary form of public amusement. Morris Brothers, Pell and Trowbridge still had their own little theatre in Province Court, and there, on every evening and two afternoons of the week, dispensed their broad, highly accentuated fun and heavily treacled sentiment. Both the fun and the sentiment seem in the retrospect rather rudimentary and raw; yet it would be absurd to deny that the vein of feeling which Stephen C. Foster

and the best of his sort worked was of genuine gold, though as thin, perhaps, as the petal of the cotton blossom, or that the negro minstrel drolleries sometimes had a contagious jollity and a rich unction which were all their own.

This was the period, also, of the first prevalence of the "variety show;" the Howard Athenæum, which had had an experience of more variety than any other piece of masonry in the city of Boston, being appropriately dedicated to the new programme. This "show" was the fountain head — or rather, the beginning — of all that kind of theatrical entertainment which now goes by the trebly absurd and grossly misdescriptive name of "vaudeville." Indeed, there is neither distinction nor difference between the entertainments with the two titles. "Vaudeville" is only "variety" "writ large" and grown fashionable. The later show has merely a bigger

THE STAGE FIFTY YEARS AGO

bill of fare, chiefly through its use of the contrivances of modern science. To the vocal and instrumental solo, the dance, the song and dance, the stump speech or monologue, the one-act drama, sentimental or comic, the dialogue, generally in dialect, of the two funny men, feats of acrobats and jugglers, and the deeds of performing dogs — all of which were of the old régime — are now added the wonders of the kinetoscope and the biograph. And this congeries furnishes the amusement which at present about equally divides with the regular theatre the public patronage, counting its daily spectators in Boston by double thousands. It is good to be able to believe that the public's morals are not jeopardized by the prevailing taste, and good to be assured that the overtaxed public's mind and overwrought public's nerves are rested and soothed by "the vaudeville." Also, it is to be hoped that

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this use of mild sedatives in the form of amusement will not be so extensive and long continued as seriously to soften the gray matter of the public's brain.

III

THE WORTH AND IMPOTENCE OF FREE CRITICISM

AS a part of an already too long introduction, it is right that I should say a brief but emphatic word as to the freedom which was accorded me by the managers and editors of the Advertiser. That freedom was perfect at the outset, and was never limited or diminished. The value of such liberty to a public critic is incalculably great; the lack of it to an honest and earnest man in that vocation is like the lack of wholesome air to human lungs. It was years before I fully appreciated my privilege in this kind, or realized how much happier was my lot than that of some of my professional brethren. The ideally perfect dra-

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matic critic must always be, even in Paris, London, and New York, a *rara avis*. The man whose equipment includes a good working familiarity with the classic and modern languages; an intimate acquaintance with all English literature, and with all that is most important in other literatures; a long experience with the theatre; a high and varied skill in writing; honesty of purpose and complete emancipation from mean personal prejudice; and, finally, the faculty, inborn, and, though highly susceptible of cultivation, never to be acquired, of detecting false touches in acting as the perfect ear detects false tones in music, — even the late brilliant, accomplished, and unimpeachable Sarcey did not fill the area of that definition. Yet if such an Admirable Crichton existed, he would not be effective on the staff of a newspaper which in any way or at any point, for commercial or any reasons, cabined, cribbed, or confined him;

IMPOTENCE OF FREE CRITICISM

hinting here, coaxing there, anon undertaking to give instructions as to his meting out of praise or blame. I have known many critics, and of the entire number have known but one whom I believed to be capable of corruption in his high office. They were, and are, as square a set of men as ever lived. But some of them were hampered and handicapped by their employers, and came short of rendering the best service to the public because of counting-room pressure in favor of liberally advertising theatres, or against theatres whose patronage was less valuable. Sometimes it has happened, also, — though seldom anywhere, I suppose, and oftener in New York than Boston, — that among the actors there were friends or foes of editors in chief or of owners, with the shameful consequence that the critic was bidden to be “a respecter of persons,” and at the same time instructed to be

crafty not to betray the secret of his partiality.

The newspapers whose criticism of the drama is thus sordidly biased are soon found out, and lose all or much of their influence with their readers. And having made this big declaration in the interest of reason and common sense, I must meekly subject it to a discount of about seventy-five per cent., and confess that a large majority of all the persons who read the daily journals have not the faintest notion of comparing or distinguishing the values of various censures. The great body of patrons of the theatre are, indeed, alike indifferent and, directly, impervious to criticism of any sort; they swarm into the playhouses with an indiscriminating eagerness of desire, which seems as masterful as the blind instinct that compels the migration of schools of fish; they are laws unto themselves, and find out and

IMPOTENCE OF FREE CRITICISM

applaud what they like by the application of those laws, some of which have roots which run far down into our common psychic protoplasm. The judicious remainder — absolutely large in numbers, though comparatively few — constitute the body to which the critic appeals, through which, by processes of slow filtration, he may hope to make some indirect impression for good upon the vast mass of humanity that fills the theatres night after night, week after week. If this statement seems cynical, the reader is requested to consider the situation in a kindred matter, and to note that three quarters of the general perusal of contemporary books is utterly uninfluenced by any kind of literary criticism. The huge public which revels in the novels, for example, of “Albert Ross” and Mrs. Mary J. Holmes knows no more about book notices than it knows about the Eddas. As far as that public is con-

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cerned, the critical journals, magazines, and reviews might as well be printed in Russian as in English, as well be published in St. Petersburg and Moscow as in New York and Boston.

IV

SOME EARLY EXPERIENCES AND MISTAKES

I HAVE said a single word about the earnestness with which I entered upon my critical profession. That earnestness, honest though it was, moved me to pursue a course one line of which I much regret. It was the day of resident stock companies, and the critic was confronted weekly, during a whole season, with the same players. Some of these actors — leaders in their troupe and others — I found to be faulty, “retrograde” to all my artistic “desire,” and therefore fit subjects for unfavorable comment. There was one variety in particular with which I could not, and cannot, be patient : namely, the hard, dry, hyperemphatic sort, usually feminine

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in gender, whose words come out, edged and clanging, as if they were disks of metal, cut and ejected by a machine. During a considerable period, beginning with 1870, there was an irruption upon the stage of players of this kind ; Miss Fanny Morant, of New York, a highly gifted actress, whose personal force carried all before it, being, I strongly suspect, the model whom they caricatured. There was also a boisterous-slouchy masculine mode, which I almost equally disrelished. But I am sincerely sorry that I found it necessary to pursue such, or any, of the regularly appearing players with reiterated disapproval. I ought to have made clear in a general way my opinion of the faultiness of the actor's method, and occasionally, but not often, have briefly reapplied my foot rule to show his particular shortcomings in a new part. I look back and admire the dignified, patient silence in which these players, with scarcely an exception, bore a fre-

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quent application of the lash at the hands of many writers, of whom I was one. Incessant fault-finding, just or unjust, is seldom good for anybody, because it either sets up in its victim a condition of nervous irritability, which defeats or impedes improvement, or produces in him a calloused or defiant indifference.

Early in my professional experience I committed a gross extravagance in laudation. Mrs. Scott-Siddons made her first appearance as a reader in the Music Hall, when she was in her twenty-sixth year. Many Bostonians lost their heads on the occasion. I infer from a reperusal of my notices of her work that I was one of those Bostonians. Her beauty was of a very radiant, rare, and exquisite sort. It seems to me that I recall that her ease and aplomb of manner, as in her sole small person she took possession of the huge desert of a stage, and serenely occupied with her desk a small oasis therein, impressed me even

more than her beauty. I incline to think that she really did read pretty well ; indeed, I am sure that she read Tennyson's Lady Clara Vere de Vere uncommonly well. But I now perceive that there was no reason for my speaking of her and the great Sarah Siddons, her great-grandmother, in the same breath, or even in the same week. A little later I received a punishment which fitted my blunder, when she essayed acting, and I was obliged to comment on her performance. Yet that she could not act does not prove that she could not read. Many excellent readers have failed utterly upon the stage; *per contra*, a few fine actors have not been acceptable as readers. But if one could have heard Mrs. Scott-Siddons through one's eyes, they would have been "worth all the rest" of the senses, and her playing would have seemed peerless.

Many of my readers will be surprised and amused to learn that every decent,

EXPERIENCES AND MISTAKES

outspoken critic raises up against himself a body of hostile unprofessionals, principally of the more excitable sex, — strong in numbers, too, if weak in brain, — to whom he is *persona* excessively *non grata*, simply because he has dispraised, or even not sufficiently praised, their favorite performer. There is something deliciously droll, and something rather touching, in such partisanship, inasmuch as the allies are, as a rule, strangers to the actor, who is therefore the object of their distant and purely disinterested cult, and also is usually a player of no great reputation. There is not a critic of a prominent daily newspaper who does not occasionally note the scowling brows and basilisk glances of strangers who detest him for his disparagement of some one, — he can seldom guess whom. Boston is of all large American cities the one in which such cherishers of sentiment are rife, because it is the most ebulliently naïve of all American cities in its passion

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for the theatre. Not very long ago, I learned that I was in the black book of every member of a certain respectable family, because of my "attitude" toward a histrionic artist whom they one and all admired. I had seldom seen the gentleman play, and had commented on him but three times: once with definite disapproval, once with mild objection, once with faint praise, — thus thrice writing myself down a perjured knave.

V

SELWYN'S THEATRE AND THE ROBERT- SON PERIOD

IN 1870 there were only five theatres in Boston, and the price of the best reserved seats varied from seventy-five cents to one dollar. The advance in public demand for theatrical amusement in this city may be inferred both from the present number of our theatres, which is fifteen, and from the doubling of the charge for places in houses of the highest grade. In that year the wave of excitement caused by the opening of Selwyn's Theatre, afterwards known as the Globe, was just beginning to subside. The establishment of the new house had been regarded as a great event, and the merits of its first three stock companies — of which Mrs. Chan-

frau, Miss Carson, Miss Mary Cary, Mrs. Thomas Barry, Miss Harris, Miss Kitty Blanchard, Mrs. Wilkins, Miss Wells, Miss Fanny Morant, Mrs. E. L. Davenport, and Messrs. Frederic Robinson, Stuart Robson, C. H. Vandenhoff, H. S. Murdoch, W. J. Le Moyne, G. H. Griffiths, Harry Pearson, H. F. Daly, and Harry Josephs were, at different times, members, — were, it might almost be said, the chief theme of Boston's table-talk. The theatre's initial experiment had been made with *La Famille Benoiton* of Sardou, played under the name of *The Fast Family*; but the triumphs of its first season were won with three curiously contrasted dramas, of which two are now unknown to the public stage, and the third is seldom seen in this country. These three were, *Dora*, a very free dramatic version, proceeding from the pen of Charles Reade, of Tennyson's brief idyl of the same name; *The Spirit of '76*, a comedietta, by Mrs. Daniel

Sargent Curtis ; and Robertson's Ours. All the theatre-going population of Boston — then about half the population of Boston — went wild over Dora, a purling piece, surface-ruffled only by Farmer Allen's tyrannical self-will and honest obstinacy, which were presented with heavy-handed effectiveness by Mr. Robinson. It was Dora herself, the gentle, persuasive Dora, the rustic but not rude, the meek but not insipid, — beautiful, sweet, sound-hearted to the core, like some perfect fruit ripened in a sunny nook of an English garden, — it was this Dora that prevailed with everybody, in the person of Mrs. F. S. Chanfrau, whose style was as frank and unaffected as her face was lovely, her voice melodious, her manner gracious. Reread, the last sentence seems to me to be lightly touched with enthusiasm. But I decline to qualify or to apologize. Dora has passed away, and Mrs. Chanfrau has quitted the stage. Dora had no special

right to live, I suppose, but nothing could make me doubt that, with the actress of thirty years ago to play the leading part, the drama would captivate sensitive hearts to-day ; and as to this declaration, I put myself upon a jury of my peers, — recognizing as my peers, for this purpose, only such persons as distinctly remember the play and its chief player.

Mrs. Curtis's drama, *The Spirit of '76*, deserves to be recalled not only for its piquant wit, but because of the interest attaching to its prophetic character. It was in form a delicate burlesque, but its plot and dialogue were underborne by a thoughtful, conservative purpose. Produced in 1868, the play was a fanciful picture in anticipation of our corner of the United States in 1876, the political and economic relations of the sexes having been precisely inverted *ad interim*. None of the more extravagant visions have anywhere come even partly true, except in

SELWYN'S THEATRE

Colorado and the three other sparsely populated gynocratic states. Massachusetts is not yet ruled by a "governess;" there are no women on its supreme bench, and none sit in its jury boxes; it has thus far escaped a law which makes it a felony for an unmarried man to decline an unmarried woman's offer of marriage. But Mrs. Curtis's adumbration of some less violent but highly significant changes was remarkable. She really predicted, in the next sequent generation of young women, that union of virile athleticism and sophomoric abandon which makes the manners of the twentieth-century girl so engaging.

Ours, by T. W. Robertson, was produced at Selwyn's in the spring of 1868, and was succeeded, in 1869, by *School, My Lady Clara*, and *The Nightingale*, by the same playwright; and within a few months, on either side of these two years, *David Garrick*, *Society*, *Caste*, *Play, Home, War*, and *The M. P.* were given at most of

the leading theatres of the country. The period from 1867 to 1877 might, with a decent show of propriety, be called the T. W. Robertsonian decade of the drama in America. In England the Robertsonian reign stretched out for twenty years or more. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* declared, in 1886, that his "popularity showed no sign of waning." The author's life was embraced between 1829 and 1871, and he knew not his first taste of success till seven years before his death. Of the dramas mentioned above, only *The Nightingale* and *War* met with failure. *David Garrick*, *Home*, and *Caste* were much the best of the series, and, of these, the first two had been brazenly — or perhaps, just frankly — plagiarized from the continent of Europe; *Home* being a loose version of *L'Aventurière* of Emile Augier. *David Garrick* lends itself to the needs of rising "stars," and seems to be booked for a stage immortality, the span of which is

that of the life of man, to wit, threescore and ten years, or, if the play be very strong, fourscore years. That some of the other dramas die hard is undeniable. Caste leads in limpet ability to cling to life. School is "revived" every now and then for a few hours, but soon resumes its slumbers. Yet, with the exceptions noted, all these plays, as far as the public stage of this country is concerned, are dead or at their last gasp. It is curious to think either of their life or of their death, of the life and death of hundreds of their contemporaries and near successors. Albery? Yates? Charles Reade? Simpson? Tom Taylor? Henry J. Byron? What, what has become of all their lavish waste of dramatic words? Even *Still Waters Run Deep* — whose plot Mr. Tom Taylor did cheerfully "convey," as "the wise it call," from *Le Gendre* of Charles de Bernard — is a forgotten demi-semi classic. Byron's *Our Boys* seems to have some of the salt

of youth in it; but his £100,000, Cyril's Success, and Our Girls, all of which were greatly in vogue for a considerable time after their production, have gone into the "Ewigkeit," with the lager beer of Hans Breitmann's "barty." Looking back at my notice of Cyril's Success, I see that I absurdly likened the wit of the comedy to that of The Rivals; but Byron's play is as dead as Scrooge's partner, while Sheridan's is good for another century, at least.

VI

THE EPHEMERAL DRAMA AND THE ENDURING DRAMA

INDEED, of all the big crowd of English playwrights who produced dramas, always with extreme facility and sometimes with contemporaneous success, between 1845 and 1875, — excepting, of course, Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, — every man but Robertson is to-day practically obsolete. Not a single one of their works has a name that will survive the first quarter of this century, unless it be a survival to be embalmed and entombed in an encyclopædia. By 1925 the stage that knew these dramas will know them no more, and Time will have allowed their claims for recognition as literature by impartially pitching them all into his dust heap.

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That Robertson's comedies should be the last to succumb to this remorseless rule of death is interesting. Their texture is of the flimsiness of gossamer; their wit usually consists of quaint equivoque; their wisdom is trite; their humor, often delicious in flavor, trickles in a thin and narrow stream; their passion, except for a few minutes in *Caste*, has neither depth nor blaze. But they showed the work of a deft hand in their effective situations; they had a grace and charm of their own, which made them cling to the memory as tenaciously as the fragrance of lavender clings to gloves and laces; and they were often in touch with life, though the touch never became a grasp. Again, a special word is to be said for *Caste*, which dealt finely, if not profoundly, with the never ceasing strain between the freedom of man as an individual and his bondage as a member of society. Nearly all these plays, also, displayed, after a fashion pe-

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culiar to their author, the familiar contrasts between generosity and meanness, simplicity and sophistication, the self-forgetting impulsiveness of youth and the self-cherishing deliberation of middle age. Robertson loved to point such comparisons by means of bits of dialogue, carried on at opposite sides of the stage by pairs of persons, neither pair being conscious of the other. The mode of many of these passages was distinctly cynical, if not unamiable; but their surface truth was of universal appeal, and their humor was fetching. Indeed, the public palate always most keenly relished Robertson's mild bitterness when it was bitterest. Some of my readers will recall an exemplary episode in *Ours*. The scene is an English private park. A heavy shower of rain has come on, and two pairs have sought shelter under the trees. On the right are a youthful couple, in the early stages of a love affair. The *jeune premier* has taken

off his coat, and insists upon wrapping it around the slender figure of the girl against her pleased but earnest objections. On the left are a middle-aged married pair. The wife presently says, in a peevish tone, "Alexander, if you walked to the hall, you could send me an umbrella;" to which the husband promptly replies, "I'd rather you'd get wet."

The deeper reasons of the law of the survival of dramas may not be laid down here and now, but a good negative working-day rule of prediction can be furnished. It seems to be a part of the present order of things, at least in English-speaking countries, that our dramas shall be ephemeral. Even the best of them are like insects, made to flaunt their little wings for a few hours in the sunshine of popular favor. The caprice of fashion deals out death with relentless speed to these plays. That they furnish the public with much entertainment is not to be questioned; but they

have no essential beauty, or imposing breadth, or prevailing power to make their appeal potent beyond a year or less of life. "The best in this kind are but shadows," said the Dramatist of the World, in one of his remarkable expressions of doubt about the art of which he was Prime Minister and Master. The rule of negative prediction is simple enough: The play which never passes into literature; the play which, in "the cold permanency of print," cannot endure reading and rereading, has the sure seed of death within it. Out of a hundred contemporary dramas, ninety are flat and unprofitable on a first perusal, and ninety-and-nine are warranted to cause mental nausea at a second. Take Robertson's *School*, for instance, which was performed to delighted hundreds of thousands, in England and America, in the early seventies. Reading it deliberately to-day is like absorbing a gallon of weak, warmish *eau sucrée* flavored with the juice

of half a lemon and a small pinch of ginger. Contrast with that work, and with works of its quality, the half a hundred tragedies and comedies which remain to us from the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ. The newest of these plays are two thousand two hundred years old: they are written in a dead language; they have the atmosphere of a remote land and an alien age and civilization; yet they still receive the quick sympathy and command the reverent admiration of the world. The corollary of the rule for negative prediction is obvious: The nation which is producing no readable dramatic literature is producing no dramas of permanent importance from the points of view of art and life, which are indeed one point and the same.

VII

THE GREAT DRAMATIC QUINQUENNIUM AND THE BOSTON MUSEUM

THE first few years of my experience were memorable for their wealth of interest, for the splendor and variety of their histrionic material, for the significant changes of the lines upon which the American theatre was to develop. Within the half decade between 1870 and 1875, Charles Fechter, Carlotta Leclercq, and Tommaso Salvini first appeared in this country ; Charles James Mathews, in admirable form, revisited our stage after a long absence ; Charlotte Cushman, having reëstablished her primacy over all our native actresses, was playing her most celebrated parts ; Nilsson and Lucca and Parepa-Rosa were first seen and heard here

in opera ; Edwin Booth was approaching the zenith of his fame and power ; Jefferson's *Rip Van Winkle* was causing itself to be accepted as the highest achievement of American comedy ; Sothorn's unique art, especially in *Lord Dundreary*, its most original expression, had prevailed over the two great English-speaking nations, but was still as fresh as the dew of morning ; Madame Janauschek's superior ability was beginning to be appreciated ; Adelaide Neilson, the incomparable, entered upon her American career ; W. S. Gilbert's peculiar gifts as a dramatist were in process of acceptance on this side of the Atlantic ; and our country, through Mr. Bronson Howard and his *Saratoga*, was making a new essay of originality in the creation of a play of contemporaneous "society." This was the period, also, of a great revival of dramatic versions of Dickens's novels, in the best of which, *Little Em'ly*, there was much good acting in Bos-

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ton : first at Selwyn's Theatre, by Mr. Robinson as Peggotty, Mr. Le Moyne as Uriah Heep, Mr. Pearson as Ham Peggotty, Mrs. Barry as Rosa Dartle, and Miss Mary Cary as Emily ; and later, at another house, when John T. Raymond gave his delicious interpretation of Micawber. Also, it may be stated in parenthesis, midway of these years, to wit in 1872, occurred in Boston the Peace Jubilee, with its huge chorus and orchestra, its foreign bands of instrumentalists, and its presentation of Madame Peschka-Leutner ; the necessary machinery having been set in motion by Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore, most persistent and tireless of conductors and *entrepreneurs*.

It was at "about this time" — the familiar quotation from the Old Farmer's Almanac is apropos — that that breaking up of stock companies, which had previously begun, took on a precipitate speed. There were still, however, a dozen or so

regularly established troupes in the whole land, and of these this city had three of the best, placed at the Boston Theatre, the Globe, and the Boston Museum. The last of these houses was in a distinctive and peculiar sense the theatre of the capital of Massachusetts : partly because of its age and unbroken record as a place of amusement ; even more because of the steady merit of its performances and the celebrity of many of its performers. At the outset, as every Bostonian knows, this establishment was conducted on the plan of Barnum's of New York. The word " theatre " was not visible on any of its bills, programmes, or advertisements. It was a museum, and justified its title by an edifying exhibit of stuffed animals, bones, mummies, minerals, wax figures, and other curios ; making, through these " branches of learning " and its long-continued obeisance to Puritan tradition — after that tradition had ceased from the Municipal Ordinances

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— by closing its doors on Saturday nights, an eloquent appeal to the patronage of sober persons, affected with scruples against the godless theatre. The appeal was as successful as it was shrewd. To this day, I doubt not, there are citizens of Boston who patronize no other place of theatrical amusement than its Museum, though the stuffed beasts and the observance of the eve of the Lord's Day are things of the past.

But, howsoever disguised or preferred by the children of the Puritans, the Museum was a theatre, if ever there was one. Those who can recall its earliest days will find clinging to their memories swarms of names, generally well mixed up as to dates and sequences : Mr. Tom Comer, leader of the orchestra, accomplished musician and genial gentleman ; W. H. Smith, an old-time actor and manager of stately style ; Mrs. Thoman, a charming performer of light comedy ; Mr. Finn, droll son of a much droller father ; the graceful and

vivid Mr. Keach ; Mr. J. Davies, who was a very "heavy" villain on the stage, but, off it, lightly wielded the barber's razor ; the blazing Mrs. Barrett, whose life went out in darkness ; J. A. Smith, who did stage fops, always with the same affected drawl and rising inflection, and, an actor at night, was a tailor by day, except on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, when he was an actor ; Miss Kate Reignolds, a very brilliant player, who, as Mrs. Erving Winslow, now enjoys the highest reputation as a reader ; the dryly effective Mr. Hardenbergh ; Mr. Charles Barron, a careful and versatile leading man ; Miss Annie Clarke, who made herself an accomplished actress, despite the handicaps of a harsh voice and native stiffness of bearing ; Mrs. Vincent, the perennial, the great-hearted, who for years was never mentioned except in close connection with the adjectives "dear" and "old ;" and, finally, William Warren, the comedian.

VIII

WILLIAM WARREN, COMEDIAN

BOSTON was fortunate, indeed, to be the home and workshop of William Warren for the better part of half a century. His career as an actor covered exactly fifty years, extending from 1832 to 1882 ; and during the entire period between 1847 and 1882, except for a single break of one year, he was the central sun of the stock company of the Boston Museum. Of the modern mode of histrionic vagabondage he had no experience, — no experience, of course, of 'the mercenary "star" system, which binds the artist to very numerous repetitions of a very few plays. When his seventieth birthday was celebrated, a little while before the close of his professional career, the tale

of his work was told : he had given 13,345 performances, and had appeared in 577 characters ! What a record is this, and how amazingly it contrasts with the experience of other noted modern players ! It may be safely presumed, I think, that no other American actor, even in the early part of the nineteenth century, ever matched Mr. Warren's figures. But compare them with those of his eminent kinsman, Joseph Jefferson, who within the latter half of his life as an actor, say from 1875 to 1900, has probably impersonated not more than a dozen parts in all ; limiting himself, at ninety-nine out of every hundred of his performances, to exactly four characters.

Something is gained, something is lost, of course, by the pursuit of either of the professional courses which have been indicated. But as I look back upon Mr. Warren and his playing, the lives of all his rivals seem narrow, monotonous, and unfruitful. His art touched life, as life is

presented in the drama, at ten thousand points. His plays were in every mode and mood of the Comic Muse, and ranged in quality from the best of Shakespeare to the worst of Dr. Jones. In old-fashioned farces, with their strong, sometimes vulgar, often noisy, usually vital fun ; in tawdry patriotic or emotional melodramas ; in standard old English comedies ; in cheap local pieces, narrow and petty in their appeal ; in delicate French comediettas, whose colors are laid on with a brush like Meissonier's ; in English versions of the best Parisian dramas, subtle, sophisticated, exigent of *finesse* and *adresse* in the player, — in each and all of these Mr. Warren was easily chief among many good actors ; to the demands of each and all he was amply adequate. The one fault of his style was a slight excess in the use of stentorian tones, — the result, I suspect, of his early immersion in farce, — and his gift of pathetic suggestion, though generally sure,

did not always have the deepest penetrative power. Otherwise, it may be said, with sober scruple for the exact truth, that Mr. Warren was nearly faultless. His acting seemed the fine flower of careful culture, as well as the free outcome of large intelligence and native genius. His enunciation and pronunciation of English were beyond criticism. His Latin was perfect, even in its quantities. His French was exquisite in intonation, and its accent was agreeable to Parisian ears. In all details of costume and "make-up" he showed the nicest taste and judgment, and the results of scholarly pains. So Mr. Warren was a School and Conservatory of acting in himself. In him Boston had a Théâtre Français, situated on Tremont Street, as long as he lived and played; and Boston ought to be ashamed of itself that it did not derive more profit from the inspection and enjoyment of his masterly art than the present time gives any proof of.

Apropos of the large attribution of the last two sentences, I wish to submit here a piece of Gallic testimony that I cited in the essay on Mr. Warren which was printed in *The Atlantic Monthly* a few years ago. With Rachel, on her visit to America in 1855-56, came M. Leon Beauvallet, as one of the *jeunes premiers* of her troupe, and historiographer of the expedition. On his return to Paris he published a thick duodecimo, entitled *Rachel and the New World*, which is one of the liveliest books ever written by a lively Frenchman. His strictures upon American life and manners were a queer mixture of flippancy, ignorance, and shrewdness. But of acting he was a keen and lucid critic, educated in the best Gallic school, familiar with all the best work of the Parisian stage. On the first Saturday afternoon of the company's first season in Boston, Rachel played *Adrienne Lecouvreur* at the Boston Theatre; and M. Beauvallet, being

“out of the bill,” repaired, with much curiosity, to the Museum to see Adrienne the Actress, cast with Miss Eliza Logan as the heroine, and Mr. Keach as Maurice de Saxe. He found the performance, as a whole, anything but to his taste, and expressed his displeasure with unsparing frankness. But of Mr. Warren he said: “Mr. W. Warren, who played the rôle of Michonnet, has seemed to me *exceedingly remarkable*. [Italics in the original.] He acted the part of the old stage manager with versatile talent, and I have applauded him with the whole house.” And after a sweeping expression of disgust concerning the various anachronisms in dress, he was careful to add, “I do not allude to Mr. Warren, who was irreproachably costumed.”

My contemporaries will heartily commend my insistence upon the greatness of this artist and the greatness of his product, and the readers of the younger generation

must submit to a recital which is, after all, nothing but a bit of the history of the American stage, with a margin of just attribution to a rare actor. Think for a moment upon the marvel of it all,—so trebly wonderful in this day of the sparse-producing player,—remembering that Mr. Warren's record stands equally for the highest skill and the richest productivity. Imagine the mental speed and acumen, the temperamental sensibility, the extraordinary power of memory both in acquisition and in grip, the complete mastery of all the symbols and tools of the profession, the huge mimetic and plastic gift, the *vis comica*, all of which are involved in the almost perfection with which the total feat was accomplished. Here was an unrivaled exemplar, also, of the docility and facility which were once supposed to be essential to the equipment of a great comedian. It was a part of the scheme, a condition which he accepted as insepa-

nable from the work of his vocation, that, within recognized limits, he should be like a French falconer, whose agents were trained to fly at any kind of game, from the noblest to the very mean. It is not to be doubted that Mr. Warren's refined taste was frequently and for long periods of time offended by the stuff of his text. But no contempt which he felt ever tainted his work; he was always faithful in every particular to play, playwright, and public, making the best of every character by doing his best in and for it. He would work — the reader must permit the use of many metaphors — with a palette knife in distemper, if he could not get a brush and oil paints; in clay and granite, when marble was not to be had; with a graver's finest tool upon an emerald, or a shipwright's broad axe upon a timber; now play merrily upon the tambourine or bones, and anon draw soul-stirring music from "the gradual violin" or the many-

voiced organ. There seemed to be absolutely no limit to his sympathy, practically none to his adaptability as an actor. Pillicoddy and Touchstone, Jacques Fauvel and Polonius, John Duck and M. Tourbillon, Mr. Ledger and Michonnet, Templeton Jitt and Jesse Rural, Sir Harcourt Courtly and Tony Lumpkin, Triplet and Dogberry, Goldfinch and Sir Peter Teazle, — that is the list of Mr. Warren's contrasting impersonations which I took for one of my texts in *The Atlantic Monthly* a dozen years ago. Fifty other pairs would have served about equally well, and the thought of any half a dozen of the coupled impersonations will avail to move my memory to glorious laughter, or to thrill it with the delicious pain of acute sympathy, or to enchant it with the recognition of consummate beauty. It is impossible to estimate how much such an actor has added to the pure pleasure of the community, or how potent a factor he was as an educator of

the general heart and mind. To a pupil of the highest sensibility, Mr. Warren's deep-hearted Sir Peter Teazle, in whom Sheridan's conception was at once justified, reproduced and developed, might of itself have gone far to furnish a liberal education. Surely, no decently appreciative spectator who sat at the artist's feet for a score of years could have failed to learn something of the difference between sincerity and affectation, breadth and narrowness, ripeness and crudity, in the practice of the histrionic art.

The temptation presents itself, and may properly be yielded to, to compare Mr. Warren and the other most distinguished American comedian, Mr. Warren's relative and close friend, Mr. Joseph Jefferson. To speak the truth will nothing wrong either of these illustrious players. It is to be conceded at once by a partisan of our local comedian that no single achievement of his career approached, in

depth and suggestiveness, in significance as an interpreter of the deeper things of the spirit, in resulting potency over the general heart of man, that *Rip Van Winkle* which, in the teeth of a thin text and fantastic plot, Mr. Jefferson has caused to be accepted as the supreme achievement in comedy of the latter half of the nineteenth century. The touch of genius is here to be seen and to be revered. It follows, also, as a sure consequence, that Mr. Jefferson will be remembered longer than Mr. Warren. The power of an artist to attain or approach immortality in any art is the power of his one most effectual work. To reach this end, a large number of very good things are as nothing beside one superlatively excellent thing. Who doubts that Joseph Blanco White's sole achievement, his matchless sonnet, *Night and Death*, will linger on the lips and in the hearts of men, when the whole mass of Spenser's beautiful poems in the

same kind exist, if they exist at all, as studies in prosody? But these large concessions do not concede everything. Our Mr. Warren, by his vastly superior wealth, variety, and scope, has earned the higher title to the sacred name of artist, of what treason soever to his fame the ungrateful memories of men shall prove to be capable. Personally, I make little account of that cheerful, chirping libel upon Dickens's creation which Mr. Jefferson has labeled Caleb Plummer, and no very great account of that effervescent *petit maître*, light of step and glib of tongue, into whom he has transformed Sheridan's clod-born Bob Acres, though I admit the actor's delicate drollery in both impersonations. Mr. Jefferson can point, it seems to me, to but one work of supreme distinction, the sole and single product of his life, the masterpiece of our stage,—the figure of the immortal Rip. Our Warren, like another Rubens, could conduct you

through a vast gallery, crowded with noble canvases, of which at least a hundred glow with the beauty and the truth of life, every one bearing his firm signature.

For many years Mr. Warren was a most interesting figure in Boston, not only upon the stage, but upon the streets over which he took his deliberate and slightly varied walks. His tall, large, well-formed figure, and his easy, rather peculiar gait, which seemed always about to become, but never quite became, a roll or swagger; his noble head, with the bright penetrating eyes and the extraordinarily sensitive mouth, made equally to utter mirth or pathos or wisdom, produced the effect of a unique personality. His manners were the finest I ever saw in a man. With actors almost all things seem to be in extremes, to be of the best or the worst. The bad manners of "the profession" are the most intolerable manners in the world. On the other hand, an experienced Eng-

lish *grande dame* spoke once with knowledge when, observing at a public assembly the rare charm of bearing of a beautiful lady whose face was strange to her, she said, "That person is either a member of the royal family or an actress." "Mr. Warren's whole "style" — if the vulgar word may be permitted — seemed to me faultless. His grace, ease, refinement, perfect modesty, absolute freedom from affectation, coupled with his swift responsiveness in facial expression and in speech, made conversation with him a delight and a privilege. And to the traits which have been mentioned is to be added a peculiar simplicity, which appeared to be the quintessence of the infinite variety of his life." "I remember hearing it said, at a time near the close of the Great War, by some men who were native here, and to the best Boston manner born, that Edward Everett, A. B., A. M., LL. D., ex-Governor of Massachusetts, ex-United States

WILLIAM WARREN

Senator from Massachusetts, ex-President of Harvard College, ex-Minister to England, *littérateur*, orator, statesman, was, in respect of distinction of manners, in a class with but one other of his fellow citizens: that other one appeared in the local directory as "Warren, William, comedian, boards 2 Bulfinch Place." It is to be added that Mr. Warren was the most reserved and reticent of mortals about everything pertaining to himself, and that he was extremely, perhaps unduly, sensitive to adverse criticism. When he bled, he bled inwardly, and of the wound he permitted no sign to escape him. He was a first favorite with all the actors and actresses of his acquaintance, and was most gentle, helpful, and tolerant to players who came to him for advice or comment.

IX

ACTUAL AND IDEAL TRAINING FOR THE STAGE

THE career of William Warren as a histrionic artist is of special interest for the light which it throws upon the vexed question of education for the stage. His exceptional record implies, of course, in the man, those exceptional native gifts which have been considered. But it is equally plain that his powers had been highly developed by training and practice, and that his art had been enriched and refined by intelligent and industrious culture. It is true that he had the right ancestral bent, and was born to the passion of the stage, and that the force of the inherited instinct and aptitude of the actor seems to be more potent than

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any other that is transmitted through the blood. Mr. Warren was the son of an English player and of an American lady of an acting family, and counted among his near relatives a father, an aunt, four sisters, and many nieces, nephews, and cousins, who attained good positions upon the stage; Joseph Jefferson being one of the cousins in the second degree. His professional training, from sources exterior to himself, was obtained wholly within the only "Conservatory" of his youthful period, to wit, the regular old-fashioned stock company. Here he was brought into contact with the best acting of his day; here he had the opportunity to study at close quarters the speech, gesture, bearing, and general method of the dramatic leaders, in a vast variety of characters, changing from night to night; and here, as a beginner, he was subjected to the caustic criticism of the stage manager. From an occasional specialist he might take lessons in fencing

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and dancing, practicing with his companions what he learned from his masters; through observing other actors, and with the help of some of the humble servants of the stage, he would begin to acquire the arts of "making up." That is literally all the schooling that Mr. Warren had. His assiduous industry did the rest. But experience shows that this schooling, limited and imperfect as it was in some respects, was adequate to make of good material a highly finished product. I doubt if Mr. Warren ever took a lesson in what is known as elocution; yet, by practice and imitation of good speakers, he made himself master of an exquisite enunciation of English, which was a source of pure pleasure to sensitive ears.

The resident stock company as a school of histrionic instruction must be said to have passed away. Actors in traveling troupes learn from one another by snatches, of course; private teachers — often retired

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actors, and sometimes of considerable skill — are fairly numerous in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston; separated by long intervals, in two or three of our largest cities, are Conservatories or Schools of Expression, of which some in terms profess to train for the stage. To the person who wishes to become an actor only the last two means of instruction are accessible, until he has got a foothold in some company. I shall have something to say by and by concerning our great national aptitude for the stage; but it is plain to any clear eyesight that the condition of chaos in respect of instruction, and the want of fixed standards at almost every point, are interfering seriously with our progress in the art of acting, and make the attainment of distinction in that art in the largest way, for the American stage, practically impossible. It is unfortunate that the actors themselves are barren of helpful suggestions. As a class they have little ca-

capacity for generalization, and scarcely one of them appears to be capable of transcending the limits of his own personal experience. Mr. Richard Mansfield, lately, in a talk intended for publication, with elaborately insincere irony disparaging his own "poor" acting, scoffed at the Conservatories, which did not succeed in sending out graduates as competent even as himself, who, as everybody knows, picked up his art pretty much at haphazard. There was truth as well as error in his strictures, — the truth being more important than the error. Thus far, our Schools of Acting, though conducted in some instances by men of ability, have failed in training candidates for the stage. One fatal criticism upon the graduates of these schools was made from the first, and continues to be made: their fault in action and in utterance is declared to be a stiffness of style, which is generally hopeless.¹¹ The explanation is obvious: the students of acting are

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not brought into touch at the right times, and kept in touch for a sufficiently long time, with the stage itself. The French have solved the problem. The Gallic actor of high ambition acquires the machinery or skeleton of his art in the Conservatory, and, contemporaneously, in the theatre, learns to rid himself of the mechanical stiffness which is almost sure to follow technical drill in enunciation, pose, and gesture. If he did not get the lightening up and limbering out of the stage, with resulting freedom of movement and utterance, the French say, his playing would suggest the operation of a machine, whose works are heard, and sometimes even seen. On the other hand, if he were not disciplined in the Conservatory, his art, in many of its particulars, would be wanting in clarity and precision. The actor of the highest grade must receive, therefore, the twofold training, — the scholastic and the theatrical. They order all these things in

France much better than we in America, and their success has demonstrated the justness of their method. Our actors have the root of the matter in them, — are sensitive, facile, intelligent, and richly endowed with the mimetic gift; but they lack the highest finish and certainty of touch, and the moment they pass outside the rapid give-and-take and short speeches of the modern comic or romantic drama they fail at many important points, especially in gesture, in clean enunciation, and in the ability to declaim passages of moderate length, wherein a nice adjustment and proportion of emphasis are essential. A hundred instances might be cited. It will suffice to mention two: Miss Maude Adams, whose impersonation of the Duc de Reichstadt in *L'Aiglon* — an impersonation of much beauty and pathos — is marred by the artist's powerlessness to enunciate intelligibly when extreme passion and speed are demanded by a "ti-

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rade;" Mr. Mansfield, who, in the long speeches of Henry V., frequently so misplaces and misproportions his emphasis that the finer shades or larger powers of the Shakespearean text are lost. If our stage were to be wholly given up to trivial and unimportant plays, such a want of the best technical training might not much matter, though still it would matter. But the demand for the best dramas has not wholly disappeared, and there is no knowing what the future may bring forth. Whenever Shakespeare or Goldsmith or Sheridan is "revived," and when a Rostand is born to us, we shall need a corps of actors trained with the finer precision and larger style of the Conservatory which is attached to a great theatre.

J. L. TOOLE AND CHARLES JAMES
MATHEWS

RECALLING the work of our great comedian reminds me of his contemporary, Mr. J. L. Toole, the English actor, who long held in London the primacy which was Mr. Warren's in Boston and New England. Mr. Toole visited America in 1874, being one of many British players whose pinnacles sailed to our golden shores in the years between 1870 and 1880. These visitors presented strong contrasts in professional ability, — the ladies being alike, however, in possessing great personal beauty. The alien artists, weighed in just scales, showed a preponderance of merit. On the side of mediocrity: Mrs. Scott-Siddons; the brisk

Mrs. Rousby, who in Tom Taylor's 'Twixt Axe and Crown presented the Princess Elizabeth Tudor, afterward Queen of England, in the mode of an amateur, with occasional flashes of brilliancy; Miss Cavendish, a large, ponderous, unimportant belle, who plodded sturdily over the dusty highway of commonplace; and Mrs. Langtry, the absurdest of actresses, whose professional stock in trade consisted of her social notoriety, her face, her figure, and the garments and jewels wherewith said figure was indued, — the garments being tagged with their "creators'" names, and bearing price marks still intentionally legible. In the scale of merit were Miss Neilson, Mr. Mathews, Mr. Wyndham, Mr. Irving, and Miss Terry. Mr. Toole's name ought, I suppose, to be added to the list of honor. But his tour in this country was far from fortunate, and he made no deep impression either upon the critics or the public. I remember his acting, and

vaguely recall his solid comic power, his humanness, and his variety, with some pleasure, but with no feeling that his art was great or distinguished. The plays which he produced in Boston were, with scarcely an exception, flimsy things, whose vogue had depended upon his success in their leading parts. I fancy that he was not happy in his American environment, and that he by no means did himself justice here. The testimony of my own memory is strong only upon a single point, and that the worst point in his entire method. He persisted in repeating over and over again queer little tricks of voice or action, which were funny for perhaps once hearing or seeing, but would not bear reiteration. His British audiences encouraged him in this habit by their naïf acceptance of it, I suspect; his American audiences would not tolerate it. In all my other experience of the theatre, I never saw a company of spectators freeze with such steady

rapidity against an actor as on one of Mr. Toole's nights at the Globe Theatre, when in *Ici On Parle Français*, he used a senseless piece of stage "business," — which caused a light laugh because of its unexpectedness, — and thrice repeated the absurdity. On the fourth recurrence of the offense, it was not only not rewarded with a single snicker, but provoked many expressions of annoyance.

In marked contrast with my faint recollections of Toole are my vivid impressions of Charles James Mathews. Mr. Mathews revisited this country in 1871, when he was sixty-eight years of age, and he seemed to me then, and seems to me now, an unequaled incarnation of the spirit of youth and jollity. The dazzling Wyndham, at less than half the age of the senior actor, was no fresher or gayer than he, and in speed of tongue and wit was only a good second to Mr. Mathews. The elder artist was not to be compared with

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Mr. Warren in the breadth and reach of his art, though he did some great things, of which I recall his impersonation, at one and the same performance, of Puff and Sir Fretful Plagiary, in *The Critic* of Sheridan. But as a producer of mirth of the volatile, effervescent variety I have never seen his equal. Nothing happier, wholesomer, or sweeter in this light kind can be imagined, and the receptive spectator of the comedian's playing often found himself affected with a delicious cerebral intoxication, which passed away with the fall of the curtain, and left naught that was racking behind. The laugh cure is the only mode which is accepted by the physicians of every school, and Mr. Mathews must have been a potent therapeutic and prophylactic agent in the health of Great Britain. He inherited his histrionic talent, and had been finely trained in the old methods. Even in France his style was considered admirable in grace,

finesse, and dexterity. Sometimes he played in French. His enunciation was a marvel of incisive and elegant precision, effected with perfect ease, and often with extreme velocity. In his utterance of the lines of Captain Patter, in his father's comedietta, Patter *vs.* Clatter, he performed an amazing feat. There were in the play six parts besides his own, the total speeches of the six others being uttered in three hundred words. The drama occupied twenty minutes in representation. Mr. Mathews's portion of the dialogue was practically an unbroken monologue of between seven thousand and eight thousand words, which were delivered in eleven hundred seconds. His talk went as a whirlwind moves, or as the water used to come down at Lodore when Southey's encouraging eye was on it; but no ear of ordinary acuteness needed to lose a syllable of his text.

XI

CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN

NEAR the time when Mr. Mathews made his last visit to our country Miss Charlotte Cushman was approaching the close of her great professional career, which had been broken by many withdrawals and returns, and marked by more misuses of the word "final" than were ever in the history of the world charged against any other artist. I saw her in her assumptions of Meg Merrilies, Lady Macbeth, and Queen Katharine, and in some of her less important characters. I thought her then, and still think her, the only actress native to our soil to whom the adjective "great" can be fitly applied. As I remember her, she was a woman of middle age, gaunt of

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figure and homely of feature, who spoke with a voice naturally high in pitch and of a peculiar hollow quality, but of great range. The beauties and all the other women of the American stage were mere children beside her. Miss Mary Anderson, perhaps the most celebrated of our other home-born actresses, bore about the same relation to her that a march of Sousa bears to a symphony of Beethoven. Her assumption of Meg Merrilies, in the stage version of Guy Mannering, was the most famous and popular of her efforts, and well merited the general favor. It was one of the few impersonations I have seen which appeared to me to deserve to be called "creations." The queer old bel-dame of Sir Walter's novel, a figure strongly outlined by his strong pen, furnished Miss Cushman with little more than the germ of her conception. The Meg Merrilies of the actress was sometimes of the order of the Scandinavian Nornæ or

of the Grecian Fates, sometimes a fierce old nurse bereft of her nursling. At moments she was merely a picturesque gypsy hag, with a grim sense of humor; anon, in speech with Harry Bertram, her crooning, brooding tenderness and yearning were more than maternal, and were poignantly pathetic; at the height of her passion she was a terrible being, glaring or glowering with eyes that reflected the past and penetrated the future, a weird presence dominating the dark woods and the cavernous hills, an inspired Prophetess and an avenging Fury. The wonder of wonders was that the performance was absolutely convincing. It was impossible to laugh at it at any point, even in its most fantastic aspects; impossible to withhold from it either full credit or entire sympathy. In it Miss Cushman, by the magic of her art, compelled the natural and the supernatural to fuse.

Her interpretation of Lady Macbeth

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was great, the actress attempting nothing novel or eccentric in her conception of the character. The lines in the performance which have fastened themselves with hooks of steel upon my memory are the four of Lady Macbeth's soliloquy near the opening of the second scene of the third act of the tragedy : —

“ Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content :
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.”

I never knew a voice so capable as Miss Cushman's of saturation with anguish; and in no other text do I remember her equally to have used her gift in this kind. The words were accompanied by the wringing of her hands; and through the first couplet, as she gave it, the listener was made to gaze into the depths of a soul, soon to enter the night of madness, already enduring the torments of hell. In the same scene, the affectionate solici-

tude of her speeches to her husband produced an indescribable effect of the terrible and the piteous in combination. A spectacle it was of a great love, driven by its impulse to minister to the loved object; being itself utterly and fatalistically hopeless and barren of comfort and of the power to comfort.

But, on the whole, Miss Cushman's impersonation of the Queen Katharine of Henry VIII. must be accounted her crowning achievement, and, therefore, the highest histrionic work of any American actress. I shall merely note, with little detailed comment, the grandeur and simplicity of the character as she presented it in the first three acts of the play. Here, her Katharine was a document in human flesh, to show how a heavenly minded humility may be a wellspring of dignity, how true womanly sensibility may exalt the queenliness of a sovereign. The bearing of Katharine at the trial, in the second

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act, has been discussed till the theme is trite, and Mrs. Siddons's interpretation of the scene and of its most famous line has been enforced, I suppose, upon her successors. The great daughter of the house of Kemble may, perhaps, have made the attack upon Wolsey, in

“ Lord Cardinal,

To you I speak,”

more prepotent and tremendous than it was possible for her transatlantic sister-in-art to make it; but it is not to be believed that any player could have surpassed Miss Cushman in the unstudied eloquence of the appeal of the wife and mother to the hard heart of the Royal Voluptuary, who sat “under the cloth of state,” his big red face, as Mademoiselle de Bury says, almost “bursting with blood and pride.”

It was in the second scene of the fourth act that Miss Cushman's genius and art found their loftiest and most exquisite ex-

pression. Katharine — now designated in the text as “dowager,” since Anne Bullen wears the crown — is led in, “sick,” by her two faithful attendants, Griffith and Patience. The careful reader of the text will mark the transition from the previous scene, filled with the pomp and throng of Anne’s coronation and with sensuous praises of the young queen’s beauty, to the plain room at Kimbolton, whence a homely, discarded wife of middle age is passing into the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Nothing of its kind that I have heard surpassed the actress’s use of the “sick” tone of voice through all of Katharine’s part of the fine dialogue. “Querulous” is the only adjective that will describe that tone, and yet “querulous” is rude and misdescriptive. The note was that which we all recognize as characteristic of sufferers from sickness, after many days of pain, or when an illness has become chronic. In Katharine this tone must not

be so pronounced as to imply mental or moral weakness or a loss of fortitude: it was but one of the symptoms of the decay of the muddy corporal vesture in which her glorious soul was closed. Miss Cushman avoided excess with the nicest art, but quietly colored the whole scene with this natural factor of pathos. A finely appealing touch was made on the words in her first speech, —

“ Reach a chair :

So ; now, methinks, I feel a little ease,” —

which were spoken first with the breaks and halts of an invalid, then with a slight comfortable drop in pitch, succeeded by a little sigh or grunt of relief at the period. All that followed was exceedingly noble, — her pity for Wolsey in his last humiliations, her pious prayer for his soul, her just, intuitive comment upon his grievous faults, her magnanimous acceptance of Griffith's attributions of merit to her implacable foe. As the shadows deepened

about the sick woman, Miss Cushman's power took on an unearthly beauty and sweetness which keenly touched the listener's heart, often below the source of tears. Her cry, out of the depths of her great storm-beaten heart, of infinite longing for the rest of paradise, after her vision of the "blessed troop," who invited her to a banquet, —

"Spirits of peace, where are ye? are ye all gone,
And leave me here in wretchedness behind ye?" —

will be recalled to-day by thousands of men and women, and at this mere mention the lines will echo and reëcho through the chambers of their memories. Katharine's one flash of indignation at the rudeness of a messenger — queenly wrath, for an instant clearing her voice and lifting her form — made more effective the rapid lapse in strength which naturally followed. Capucius, the gentle envoy of her "royal nephew," the Emperor Charles V., has entered with messages of "princely com-

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mendations" and comfort from King Henry. To him she gave her last charges, all for deeds of loving-kindness to those about her, with an eagerness of desire which carried through her broken voice. Her messages of meekness and unfaltering affection to her false husband were, of all her touching words, the most poignant. In her commendation of her daughter Mary to the king, who is besought "a little to love" the child, —

“ for her mother’s sake that lov’d him,
Heaven knows how dearly,” —

and in her word of farewell to Henry, —

“ Remember me

In all humility unto his highness :

Say his long trouble now is passing

Out of this world: tell him, in death I bless’d
him,

For so I will,” —

the supreme point of pathos was reached. The throb and thrill of her voice in the italicized lines deserve never to be for-

gotten. After the word "say" there was a second's hesitation, then the phrase descriptive of herself, "his long trouble," was breathed in a sort of sob, into which was concentrated with meek unconsciousness a damning indictment of her cruel lord.

Throughout the final fifty verses of the scene Miss Cushman caused Katharine's voice to grow gradually thicker, as the night of death closed in upon sight and speech. But Katharine's last command, that she "be used with honour" after her death, and, "although unqueen'd," be interred "yet like a queen, and daughter to a king," given slowly and with the clutch of the Destroyer upon her throat, was superb and majestic. The queenly soul had prevailed, and wore its crown despite the treason of king, prelates, and courts. After Miss Cushman, all recent attempts, even by clever actresses, to impersonate Katharine of Aragon seem to me light, petty, and ineffectual.

XII

E. A. SOTHERN, SR.

THE most noted achievement of one of our leading comedians, to which allusion was made in a previous chapter, — the Lord Dundreary of E. A. Sothern, the elder, — is peculiarly worthy of remembrance and of being freshly recalled to the minds of all who witnessed the performance. I am inclined to believe that the records of the theatre furnish no parallel with the experience of the actor and the public in respect of this impersonation.

Mr. Sothern was a player of ability, recognized in his profession, before he became celebrated. The received story concerning the original production of Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* appears to

be substantially true. The manager was very anxious for the triumph of the new play, hoping for a reëstablishment of prosperity upon the basis of its success, and, in order to increase the strength of a very strong cast, purchased the reluctant consent of Mr. Sothern to accept the unimportant part of a stage fop by giving him full leave to "gag ;" that is to say, to enlarge and vary his assigned text with new matter of his own interpolation. Out of this acceptance and this license a unique histrionic product was evolved.

Even at the first representations of the comedy the public eye and ear were taken and filled with Mr. Sothern's extraordinary action and speech, and the other chief players, of whom several ranked with the best in the country, in spite of their cleverness and the greater significance of their parts, found themselves relegated into the background. The scheme and perspective of the author were much impaired, indeed almost

inverted as in a moment. It was something as if Osric had pushed himself in front of Hamlet. And no one was more surprised than Mr. Sothern himself. Whence the actor derived the outside of his impersonation I have not been informed. Its substratum was the conventional dandy of the theatre, of course, — one of the foolishhest and unrealest of fictions, — and Continental Europe had evolved a caricature of the traveling Britisher which adumbrated Mr. Sothern's make-up ; but the aggregation of Lord Dundreary's oddities could hardly have originated with the actor. I think he must have encountered somewhere an Englishman whose whole dress, speech, and manner displayed the courage of a monstrous eccentricity. Here, at all events, was a bird of a new feather, — of a new variety, species, genus.

Who that looked upon the noble lord can ever forget the glare of his monocle, and the rigid play of the muscles that held

the glass in place ; the corrugations of his anxious brow ; the perpetually varied movements of his lips and chin as he struggled to utter himself ; the profuse hair of the period ; his long, silky whiskers ; the hop-and-skip walk, — that gait which was not of “ Christian, pagan, nor man ; ” his talk, in which a combined lisp, stutter, and stammer, punctuated by quaint gurgles and chuckles, made an unprecedented novelty in human vocalism ; and the long, sumptuous coats and dressing gowns and amplitudinous trousers which he affected ? The whole thing came close to the verge of gross absurdity, but through the actor’s rare gifts in drollery and vivacious intensity was accepted, freely and with a delicious sense of immersion in a new kind of fun, by the whole public, gentle and simple.

If Mr. Sothern had gone no further than to produce the strange figure which has been partially described, and to make it

effective for mirth, the event would have deserved only a mere mention. But he proceeded, with processes and results like those of creative genius, to broaden and deepen his conception, until his Lord Dundreary, without any loss, or rather with an increase, of his comicality, came to have a definite individuality, and to exemplify certain common weaknesses and limitations, which cause the brightest of us acute misery at times, but in him were chronic and the source of continual discomfort. The nobleman's text and business were enlarged fourfold, and the rest of the play was proportionally reduced. The developed Dundreary was occasionally asinine, but he was by no means the idiot that the crowd had at first imagined him to be. In truth, it now became evident that the noble lord had a mind of his own, — peculiar, but real, capable of clearness, capable even of penetration and astuteness, but cursed with a tendency to err in dealing with the sur-

face resemblance of things. Life was a muddle by reason of these recurring likenesses, and language was a pitfall or a labyrinth. It was a genuine grief and trial to him, though very amusing to the spectators, when he came upon another of "those things that no fellah can find out." His weakness was carried to the point of farcical extravagance, but there was something to sympathize with when he was most ridiculous, and one had new visions both of the inherent weakness and the latent capacities of our language when he said, with eager hitches and emphatic bursts, to Lieutenant Vernon: "Of course you can *pass* your examination ; what I want to know is, can you *go through* it?" Closely allied to this mental infirmity, and another important element in the humor of the conception, was Dundreary's absolute incapacity to cherish more than one idea at a time. A single thought, whether great or small, brimmed his brain, and his cerebral machinery was

thrown completely out of gear by the intrusion of another idea. The rhythmic motion of Asa Trenchard's foot made it impossible for him to remember the words of his song ; the accidental view of a split hair in his whiskers caused him to be oblivious of Georgina's narrative ; a sudden discovery of her chignon, when her back was modestly turned, and the train of consequent meditation, broke him off in the midst of an offer of marriage.

The funniest and most highly illustrative incident of this sort was the famous passage in which his search for his misplaced trousers pocket passed from a usual automatic act to a mind-absorbing effort, and — with a perfect parallelism of effect at every stage — at first left his words unchecked, then gradually slowed his tongue, then stopped his speech altogether, finally required the united devotion of hand, eyes, and brain to discover the missing receptacle. Dundreary's mind had — to change

the figure — a single track, with very few switches, and his confusions of intellect were the result of collisions of trains of thought, running in opposite directions. In a large way, Dundreary was an inclusive satire upon the small stupidities of our human nature, and his most inane utterances awakened answering echoes, as has been said, in the consciousness of the most sensible men and women.

Mr. Sothern's Dundreary became, indeed, something more than "a definite individuality," in the phrase just now used; he passed into a genuine and convincing personality. He was a true product of invention and synthetic art, and even his extreme eccentricities were soon accepted as innate, unconscious sincerities, not as conscious affectations. The noble gentleman grew to be lovable, and the quaint conjunction in him of eager good nature with nervous irritability proved to be a source of charm as well as mirth. Ex-

traordinary were the variously combined expressions of complaisance, stupidity, humor, and acuteness which flitted over his countenance, and the diversity of intonations which finely indicated the proportions of his much-mixed emotions was wonderful. A page might be filled with descriptions of his different smiles; the broad, effulgent smile which filled his face when he thought he had struck a brilliant conversational idea, and his dubious, tentative, come-and-go flicker of a grin when he was feeling his mental way, being two striking examples in the vast variety. The surprises which he effected by his comic gift were often overpowering, and made the spectator fairly gasp and choke, as two contrary currents of mirth suddenly poured into the unprepared brain.

I think the funniest small thing I ever noted at a theatrical performance was his delivery of one of Dundreary's speeches in connection with Sam's "letter from

America." The passage began, "Dear Bwother," Mr. Sothern reading the opening words of the epistle; then he made one of his pauses, and, with a characteristic click and hitch in his voice, commented, —

"Sam always calls me his bwother — because neither of us ever had a sister."

Left without further description, the phrase might pass with the reader as rather droll; but on the words "because neither of us ever had a sister" the actor's voice became instantly saturated with mock pathos, and the sudden absurd demand for sympathy reached the amazed auditor with soul-tickling effect.

Mr. Sothern played several other parts brilliantly well. His impersonation of David Garrick was surpassed upon our stage only by Salvini's. Dundreary's Brother Sam he made an interesting figure of fun; and during the latter years of his life he achieved great success in *The Crushed*

Tragedian, a drama reconstructed, for the actor's purposes, from The Prompter's Box, of Henry J. Byron, in which Mr. Sothern took the part of an unfortunate player, whose bearing and speech in private life were portentously and melodramatically theatrical. There were many good passages in the comedy, and one of the most notable occurred in a passage-at-arms between the thin, out-at-elbows tragedian and a large-girthed, purse-proud banker. The actor had spoken of "the profession," meaning, of course, his own; the banker answered, with a sneer, "Oh! you call it a profession, do you?" and the player replied, with superb conviction of superiority, "Yes, we do; banking we call a trade," — the retort hitting rather harder in London than here, because in England "the trade of banking" was a familiar and technical phrase.

The dialogue which was last quoted, and a half line of comment passed above

upon a stage fiction, come together in my mind. It is not uncommon to hear close observers of the life of cities speak of the peculiar remoteness and aloofness of the theatrical profession from other orders of humanity; but only a very small proportion even of thoughtful persons come near to realizing how complete is the separation of the actor and actress from other men and women. The conditions of modern life, with the prevailing passion for publicity, incarnated in the newspaper reporter, whose necessity knows no law, and expended with special force upon the people of the theatre, who often seem to invite notoriety, have, in fact, accomplished very little in breaking down the barriers which divide "the profession" from the rest of the world. The race of gypsies does not lead an existence more alien from its *entourage* than the order of players. Here and there, actors or actresses of uncommon distinction or definite social ambition,

sought or seeking, make appearances in "society;" but such irruptions are few and intermittent. Mr. Irving is the only great artist of our day who has made social prestige a steady feeder of histrionic success. Edwin Booth and William Warren, with all their rare gifts, grace, and charm, were practically unknown in private, except to other actors and a few personal friends. The prejudice of the outside world has doubtless been an important agent in effecting this segregation; but if that prejudice, which has been gradually diminishing, were wholly to disappear, the situation would remain substantially unchanged, I am convinced, for centuries to come.

XIII

THE ISOLATION OF ACTORS

THIS condition, which from some important points of view is fortunate, from others unfortunate, and from nearly all inevitable, is unique indeed. Here we have the only large class of workers which keeps the world at arm's length. Clergymen, physicians, lawyers, architects, merchants, tradesmen, and laborers of all sorts by the very terms of their toil, are brought into constant personal contact with parishioners, patients, clients, or customers. Even painters and sculptors must needs be in touch with their patrons. But that thin, impassable row of blazing lamps, which rims the front of the stage, accomplishes what the Great Wall of China was built to accom-

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plish. Behind them is the sole "profession;" in front of them the barbarous laity. If the player desired to break down the partition, he would scarcely be able to do so. From the more important social gatherings, which take place in the evening, both actress and actor are necessarily absent; the actor may vote, if he can acquire a residence and contrive to be in his own city on election day, but it is impossible that he should take any active part in politics or participate in preliminary meetings, caucuses, and "rallies," which are held at night; and as to attendance at church, the player encounters, in the first place, the difficulty, inseparable from his wandering life, of making a connection with a parish, and besides, in recent years, is almost constantly required to travel on Sunday, passing from a Saturday evening's performance in one town to a Monday morning's rehearsal in another.

Quite unrelated, however, to these out-

ward limitations of the histrionic life is the disposition of the players themselves. They compose a guild of extraordinary independence, which, in spite of its vague and shifting boundaries, intensely feels and sturdily maintains its *esprit de corps*. "Independence of temper," as Mr. Leon H. Vincent lately said, "is a marked characteristic of the theatre and of theatrical life. The stage is a world to itself, and a world altogether impatient of external control." One cause of this temper is to be found in the legal disabilities under which the player labored in most countries for many years. The reaction was sure. Treated as an outlaw, the player became a law unto himself. But the *causa causans* lies in the peculiar conditions of temperament which inhere in most actors, and in the singular concentration and devotion of energy, essential to success upon the stage, which are exercised upon the

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fictive material of the theatre. The rule, to which there have been important but few exceptions, is that the actor, like the acrobat, must be caught and practiced young, in order that the suppleness required in the mimetic as in the gymnastic art may be attained ; and, as a result of the application of this rule, nearly all the great body of actors are devoid of general academic and scholastic training. Their culture is the culture of their own private study, worked out in the green-room and on the stage. It is marvelous what acquisitions many of them make with such handicaps ; but their general narrowness of mental vision may be inferred. Practically out of relation, then, with the social, political, and religious life of the entire rest of mankind, immersed in the unreal realities of the mimic life, driven both by natural impulse and by professional competition to whet their talent to the sharpest

edge, the guild of actors is the most charming, naïf, clever, contracted, conventional, disorderly, sensitive, insensible, obstinate, generous, egotistic body in the world, and — “unique.” Players are as conservative and as superstitious as sailors ; they have but one theme, one material of thought and conversation, — the theatre, and, of course, themselves as exponents of the theatre. They hold to their traditions like North American Indians, and their conventions have the perdurable toughness of iron. Be the thing bad or good, once it is firmly fastened upon the theatre, it sticks indefinitely. The stage fop, now almost obsolete, was a survival, probably, from the period of the Restoration, and drawled and strutted over the boards for hundreds of years after he had disappeared from society. Yet actors are distinguished by plasticity. That they succeed as well as they do in reproducing the contempo-

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rary life which they see only by snatches is little short of a miracle, and demonstrates the extreme speed and delicacy in observation of some of them, and the large imitative gift of others, together with a power of divination, which is an attribute of genius. Through the operation of natural selection, they are practically birds of a feather, and the most docile and intimate layman never quite learns their language or long feels at home in their company. That it is highly desirable, for a dozen grave reasons, that the actor should be less a stranger to his fellow men is obvious ; and also it is obvious that, to the end of the world, success upon the stage will involve in the successful artist a peculiar attitude of mind, a peculiar adaptability of temperament, and a rare singleness of devotion, which must separate him from the laity. Comparative isolation will always be a condition of high

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achievement in the histrionic profession, and the stage will always have a climate and an atmosphere of its own, with which the thermometers and barometers of the outer world will have no immediate relation.

XIV

CHARLES FECHTER

DURING the season of 1869-70 Charles Fechter played for the first time in the United States, appearing first in New York, and opening, in March of the latter year, at the Boston Theatre as Hamlet. He was born in London, in 1824, and was the son of an Englishwoman and Jean Maria Fechter, a sculptor, who was of German descent, but a native of France. Notwithstanding the mixture of his blood, Charles Fechter was wholly French in his affiliations and sympathies, loathed Germany and all its ways, works, and words, and was careful to pronounce "Fayshtair" his surname, the first syllable of which Boston, because of its extreme culture, persisted and persists

in giving with the North Teutonic guttural. In his early childhood he was taken to France, where he grew up, and, after dabbling for a short time in the clay of the sculptor, studied for the stage, and at the age of twenty appeared successfully, in *Le Mari de la Veuve*, at the Théâtre Français, of whose company he afterwards became *jeune premier*. In Paris he attained a great reputation, though he was often censured for his audacious disregard of the conventions of the classic drama. He had had a polyglot education, and early acquired a good knowledge of English, which he taught himself to speak fluently and with a generally correct accent, though it was impossible for him quite to master the intonations of the language. In 1860, with characteristic boldness, he assailed London, playing *Ruy Blas* in English at the Princess's Theatre. His success was signal, and for ten years as a star he made England his firmament, also

holding the lease of the Lyceum Theatre from 1862 to 1867. He was sped on his transatlantic way by the praise of most of the critical journals of the great metropolis, and by the warm eulogium of his friend Charles Dickens. His complete abandonment of England for this country tends to prove that he had outworn the best of his favor in the British Isles.

In New York Fechter's interpretation of Hamlet was greeted with a chorus of disapproval, broken by emphatic praise from several high sources, and his innovations upon received traditions as to the outer particulars of the performance were the subject of much disparagement. The public, however, were keenly interested in all his work, especially in his assumptions of Ruy Blas, Claude Melnotte, and other romantic characters. I thought, and think, that most of the vexed questions of detail alluded to were matters of leather and prunello. Fechter's reasoning — de-

rived from a distinguished commentator — that Hamlet was a Dane, and that Danes are fair, with the practical conclusion that he played the Prince of Denmark in a blond wig, seemed to me of no import either for praise or blame; and as long as he, or another actor, did not defeat the Poet in letter or in spirit, I was willing that he should find, indicate, and manipulate the pictures-in-little of the elder Hamlet and Claudius in any way that suited his taste or convenience. His conception of the melancholy prince was a different matter, and from first to last I held to the opinion that he did not rightly indicate the weaknesses of spirit and temperament with which Shakespeare has chosen to disable his otherwise noblest ideal, for the reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness of mankind throughout the ages. The general public did not much concern itself, of course, with questions as to the actor's fidelity to the dramatist's

psychic scheme, but immersed itself in the novel and agreeable sensations excited by Fechter's vivid and impressive playing. New York, always more closely critical of acting than other American cities, and much influenced, no doubt, by Mr. Winter's severe censure, held out in many quarters against the new Hamlet. But Boston, manifestly relieved by the change from Edwin Booth's more conventional and studied, though far more just and intuitive impersonation, incontinently accepted the French artist's performance, satisfied for the time with its outward and visible charms, its vitality, directness, and fervid sincerity.

Mr. Fechter, at this part of his career, was, indeed, an exceedingly fascinating and eloquently appealing actor. He was somewhat handicapped by the plainness of his features and the bluntness of his figure; but his gift in facial expression was varied, and his countenance, at mo-

ments of stress, readily took on majesty or strength, sometimes delicate spiritual beauty. His voice was rich and sweet, and easily capable of emotional saturation, though not of the widest range. His foreign intonations were numerous, as has been implied, and were very funny when mimicked; but, while he was acting, he so possessed his auditors that they seldom found opportunity to be amused. Personally, I have generally felt, and often expressed, a distaste for broken English on the stage, and I regard the easy-going toleration of the imperfect speech of alien actors as one of the signs of the rawness of our public. Fechter's failings annoyed me less, however, than those in this kind of other foreigners; and, after a time, I even learned to tolerate the queerest of his blunders, probably because they seldom took the shape of faulty emphasis. Several important and common words he never mastered; even "love" — the verbal talis-

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man, treasure, pabulum, and *sine qua non* of the comedian — he pronounced in a mean between *loaf* and *loave*, to the end of his career. But with the appearance of Fechter American audiences first came in contact with an actor of great natural gifts and Continental training, who used the English language at his performances. In many ways the experience was a revelation. Here was the culture of the Comédie Française, conveyed through the vernacular, and not under the immense disadvantage of exposition in a foreign tongue. One could see, as Fechter played, the potency of abundant but perfectly appropriate gesture, the action fitted to the very word, the word to the action, according to Hamlet's prescript; the trained aptitude for rapid transitions of feeling; the large freedom of movement; the ease and force of style which seemed spontaneous and unstudied, when most refined. After an experience of Fechter in tragedy or

romance, one returned to our great native artists, and found them, by contrast, rather cool and starchy.

Nature, which had definitely, though not meanly, limited Mr. Fechter on the higher side of the intellect, had endowed him with a temperament of rare sensibility and ardor. Even if he had conceived the character of Hamlet aright, I doubt if he would have found it possible to embody his conception. Hamlet sometimes seems to be doing, and, when he is only marking time, tries to make believe that he is marching. I imagine that Fechter could not have contrived to import into the part of the prince that tentative, indecisive quality which characterizes Hamlet's love for talking and thinking, and his disinclination for persistent doing, which is made only plainer by occasional unpremeditated acts of violence. His Hamlet's feet were planted firmly on the earth; and his head was six feet above them, — not in the

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clouds, where Shakespeare put it. But when the matter in hand was one of clear romance; when youthful love, or the power of loyalty, or the spirit of daring was to be exemplified; indeed, when any common passion was to be shown in any usual way, Mr. Fechter's playing was eminently effective. As Ruy Blas, his bearing in his servile attire at the outset was singularly impressive, — true native dignity without presumption, deep pride without arrogance, the simplicity of a great, unsuspicious nature. His first revelation of his passion for the queen awakened profound sympathy; and in his interview with Don Cæsar, wherein one noted the manly affectionateness of his love for his friend, the actor's power of intensity of utterance and of swift transitions of feeling had remarkable illustration: at one moment his heart's secret rushed forth as if it could not be stayed; and in the same breath he checked himself

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in a spasm of self-disgust at his folly, with a half-mournful, half-humorous gesture of deprecation, but only to be swept away again by the torrent of feeling that must relieve itself by speech. In the great final act the actor's manifold power attained its maximum. Through his soliloquy, dark with his own woe, yet resonant with exultation over the apparent deliverance of the queen, the agonizing encounter with his mistress, the discovery of the plot to ruin her, the triumphant entrance of Don Salluste, the humiliating disclosure of his humble birth, and the insulting proposals of the nobleman to the wretched queen,—through all these scenes the passion of the actor grew hotter and hotter, until it culminated in the thrilling passage where he snatched his enemy's sword from its scabbard, and, with the voice of an avenging angel, proclaimed his purpose to slay the don as a venomous snake. In all that followed his action was of magnetic quality;

and in his final dying instants, in which, after the proud self-abnegation with which he declared himself a lackey, he held out his arms to embrace the queen, the eager, reverent tenderness of the action, and the look of love and exaltation which transfigured his face before it stiffened in death, were profoundly stirring and very beautiful. There was no rant in any passage, and no evidence of deficient self-control. The charge of extravagance might as well have been made against a tornado as against Mr. Fechter's *Ruy Blas*, at its height.

In *The Lady of Lyons* he achieved a similar triumph, which was perhaps more remarkable because of the material in which he was there compelled to work. *Ruy Blas* may be called great, without much strain upon the adjective ; but Bulwer's play is a crafty thing of gilt, rouge, and cardboard. Fechter's acting redeemed the English work from the artificiality and tawdriness which seemed of its essence,

gave it new comeliness, and breathed into it the breath of life. The damnable plot upon which the action of the play turns has cast a shadow over the hero, which his fine speeches and copious tears, upon the tongues and cheeks of other actors, have failed to remove. But Fechter so intensified the cruelty of the insult received, and made the quality of Claude's love so pure, lofty, and ardent, that he delivered the character from its long disgrace. It is possible to raise a question as to the depth of the feeling displayed ; but, leaving that question unanswered, I commit myself to the assertion that Mr. Fechter's love-making was the best I ever witnessed upon the stage. In the gift of self-delivery into one short action or utterance, also, I think he surpassed all his compeers, though Salvini, Booth, Irving, and many other leading actors have excelled in the same way. In the third act of *The Lady of Lyons*, when he turned upon Beauseant and

Glavis, there was a remarkable display of this power in Mr. Fechter, when he made three commonplace words, "Away with you !" fall upon his tormentors like a bolt from a thundercloud. Mr. Booth played Ruy Blas and Claude Melnotte rather often in his early life, and briefly returned to them a few years before his death. His performance of neither part — though his playing did not lack distinction, of course — was worthy to be ranked with Fechter's. Booth's Ruy Blas seemed dry and slow in comparison with the French actor's, and Booth's Claude Melnotte, which resembled a double dahlia, was insignificant beside an impersonation that had the splendor and fragrance of an Oriental rose. Fechter was essentially a player of melodrama, however, — a master of the exterior symbolism of the histrionic art, but fully qualified neither to search into the spiritual and intellectual depths of the greatest dramatic conceptions, nor to carry

out such conceptions to their just extent, or with a large grasp of their complicated parts, and the relations and proportions of the same. I have said bluntly that in romantic characters, such as the two which have been selected for special comment, he much excelled our leading American actor. But it is impossible to conceive of Mr. Fechter as interpreting King Lear or Iago or Macbeth with any approach to adequacy. His playing was almost perfect in its order, but the order was not the first.

I deem it worth while to record a curious passage in one of the very few talks I had with Mr. Fechter, because the quoted words will furnish a good illustration of the certainty that a player who is using a foreign language will make some grievous blunder in handling a classic of that language, in spite of his pains and industry. I was so foolish as to get into an argument with the actor concerning his theory of Hamlet, which I attacked

on lines already indicated. Mr. Fechter defended his conception, and declared that the prince did not procrastinate, but pursued his task with vigor. Quotations flowed freely, and I was about to clinch my argument by citing the words of the Ghost at his second appearance to Hamlet, when the actor interrupted me.

“Now,” he said, “what can you answer to this, Mr. Clapp? Do you not recall the words of Hamlet’s father in the queen’s closet, ‘I come to *wet* thy almost blunted purpose’?”

That inquiry ended the discussion. It was plain that Mr. Fechter had never distinguished “whet” from “wet,” and that he had no notion of the force of “blunted.” His idea was that the Ghost’s declared purpose was to “wet” down, and so reduce, the excessive flame of Hamlet’s zeal.

In a few emphatic words I wish to bear testimony to the merits of Miss Carlotta

Leclercq, who supported Mr. Fechter, and afterwards went on a starring tour in this country, playing a great variety of parts, both in comedy and tragedy, with admirable intelligence, vigor, and taste.

Mr. Fechter's decline was melancholy. It seemed to date from his engagement as leading actor and general manager of the Globe Theatre, of which Mr. Arthur Cheney was proprietor. In the autumn of 1870 Mr. Fechter entered upon this part of his career. Miss Leclercq accompanied him as leading lady, her brother Arthur being stage manager. Mr. James W. Wallack was engaged as second leading man. *Monte Cristo* was brought out by the new corps, successfully and with much splendor, on the 14th of September, and ran eight weeks. Then Mr. Fechter presented many characters in his repertory, showing a very slight falling off in his ability; and the public appetite for his product displayed signs of abatement. Next came

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internal discords, which grew chiefly out of Mr. Fechter's impetuous temper and his inability to get on with American actors and employees. With scarcely any warning to the public, a rupture took place, and on the 14th of January, 1871, in *Ruy Blas*, he appeared in the Globe Theatre for the last time. During several sequent years, after one return to England, he acted in many American cities. Gradually his powers began to fail, and his engagements were made with second-class theatres. It was pitiful to see the waning of his strength, indicated by lapses into rant, and by the development of slight mannerisms into gross faults. One of his clever devices had been the use of brief pauses for effect; now the pauses were lengthened out till they became ridiculous. It is probable that growing physical disability accounted for this decadence. In 1876 he broke his leg, and retired from the stage to his farm in Richmond, Penn-

sylvania, where he died on the 5th of August, 1879.

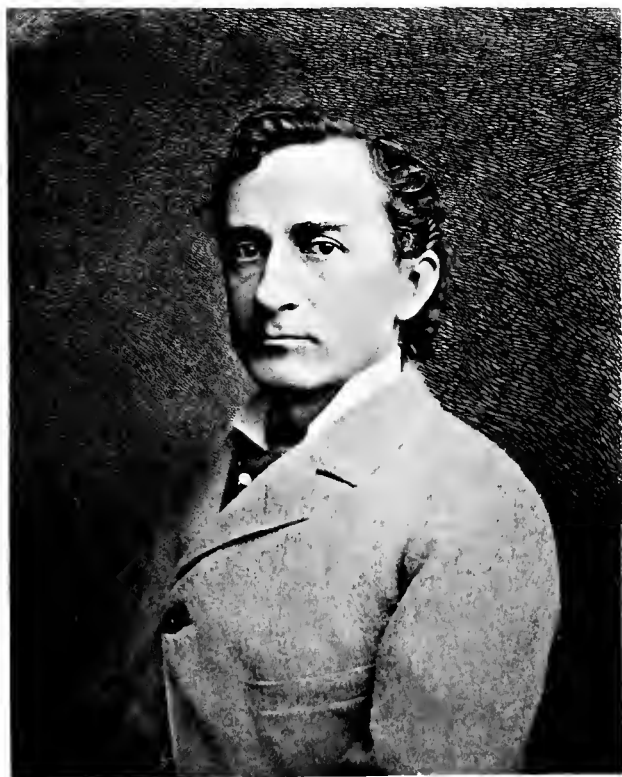
I have known only one other case of gradual histrionic disintegration in the early life of a player. A native actress, who attained fame in her youth, and, in spite of many crudities and excesses of style, prevailed through frequent flashes of genius, first showed the subsidence of her power by the steady widening of her peculiar extravagances; then, suddenly, all vitality disappeared from her playing, which became a mere desiccated husk, with queer contours, rigid and fixed.

XV

EDWIN BOOTH

THERE is no occasion for me to discuss minutely the work of him whose art was the crown of our tragic stage during nearly all the second half of the nineteenth century,—of Edwin Booth, *clarum et venerabile nomen*. There had been scarcely a break in the reign of his dynasty for the seventy-two years between 1821, when the wonderful Junius Brutus Booth, Sr., began to act in the United States, and 1893, when the son, Edwin, after a life strangely mixed of gloom and glory, “passed to where beyond these voices there is peace.” The elder tragedian died in 1852, and in 1852 the younger, at the age of nineteen, in California, was playing “general utility

business." My memory holds an undimmed picture of Edwin Booth as I first saw him at the Boston Theatre, in Shakespearean parts, during the season of 1856-57, when he was twenty-three years of age, — beautiful exceedingly in face and form, crude with the promise-crammed crudity of youthful genius, and already showing, with short intermissions and obscurations, the blaze of the divine fire. From that point I followed him, I may say, through his histrionic course until its close, as hundreds of my readers followed him. We saw, with an interest and curiosity always keen and a satisfaction seldom marred, his gradual growth in refinement and scholarship, the steady deepening and enriching of his docile and intuitive spirit, the swift experimental play of his keen intellect, and the broad development of that style in which the academic and the vital were so finely fused.



A famous *nomen* I called him even now. Alas ! the plain truth in plain English is that his illustrious name and fame and the tradition of his art are all that is left to the American tragic stage, which to-day is trodden only by the spirits of departed actors, of whom all but him are practically forgotten. A vacant stage, haunted by ghosts, visited by dying winds of memory ! One recalls with delight the purity of his enunciation, the elegant correctness of his pronunciation, the exquisite adjustment and proportion of his emphases, his absolute mastery of the music and the meaning of Shakespeare's verse ; and then, one may note, if one chooses, that the art of elocution, as he practiced it, is to all intents and purposes, for the theatre of 1902, a lost art.

A great tragic actor, who is dealing with material such as that which is furnished by the Great Dramatist, is usually driven by an imperious impulse to try ex-

periments with his text and to vary his histrionic conceptions as he advances in years and knowledge, and as his temperamental force waxes or wanes. Edwin Booth furnished a signal and most interesting example of the effect of this impulse, which was of itself a proof of the unflagging vitality of his spirit. With scholarly eclecticism, at different times he made choice of various "readings," subjecting them to the test of stage delivery,—often the best alembic in which to try their values,—and with innumerable diversities of vocal shading, *ictus*, and cadence sought to utter the Master Poet's thought with new delicacies or new potencies. I think it might be fairly said that his theories of the great characters were never wrong or seriously defective. And through his shifting ideals, as they were embodied from year to year, the spectator could discern the extraordinary variety of treatment which Shakespeare's

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creations, because of their many-sided humanness, will permit.

I have seen him play Shylock, sometimes as a fierce money-catching old-clothes dealer of Jewry; sometimes as a majestic Hebrew financier and lawgiver; sometimes, at his full maturity, in what I suppose to be the just mean between the two extremes: and the Jew was terrible, vital, convincing, in every aspect. I witnessed the advance in his impersonation of Richelieu, whose theatricalism he succeeded in interpreting in terms of fiery sincerity, until the cardinal was equally imposing in his wrath and fascinating in his shrewdness and amiability. The changes in his conception of Iago were peculiarly noteworthy, the movement being almost steady from lightness in tint and texture to darkness and weight. His early Iago was a gay, jocund, comfortable villain, malicious rather than malevolent, at his strongest moments suggesting the

litheness and swiftness, the grace and ominous beauty, of a leopard, to which, indeed, in attitude and action, he bore a physical resemblance. His last Iago showed a vast deepening and broadening of the artist's idea. The subtle Venetian, still as persuasively frank in speech and manners, as facile and graceful, as before, now threw a shadow of baleful blackness as he walked, was Prince of the Power of the Air as he wove and cast the dreadful "net that shall enmesh them all," and in his soliloquies uttered such a voice of unquenchable anguish and hate as might proceed from the breast of Satan himself.

Mr. Booth's assumption of King Lear I put at the head of all his performances. The tragedian, as the "child-changed father," showed, I thought, a loftier reach of spirit, a wider and stronger wing of imagination, a firmer intellectual grasp, than he displayed elsewhere, even in the other great assumptions more frequently associ-

ated with his name. That he had not as magnificent a physical basis for the part as Salvini is to be conceded; but Mr. Booth's Lear had been wrought into as pure a triumph of mind and soul over matter as the most idealistic critic could wish to see. Without extravagance of action or violence of voice, without extreme effort, indeed, of any sort, the chaotic vastness of Lear's nature, the cruel woe sustained through the ingratitude of his daughters, the fullness of his contrition over his own follies and his rejection of Cordelia, the moral splendors which illuminate the darkness of his insanity, and the sweet anguish of his restoration to clearness of mind and to gentleness of thought, word, and deed, — all these were grandly exhibited. The progress of mental decay in the king was indicated with consummate skill, Booth's interpretation of the whole of the third act being a lesson to the profession in the art of picturesque

effectiveness without superelaboration. In the final scenes with Cordelia the tragedian reached his highest point. Mr. Booth's ability in pathos was unequal, but in these passages it was exquisite and poignant, the dryness which sometimes marred his efforts in this kind being replaced by suavity and warmth, like those of an April rain.

Mr. Booth's limitations were obvious. He had little success in straight love-making; in some few seconds of his dialogues with Ophelia, the passion of Hamlet's love was mixed with a spiritual pain and unrest, which somehow heightened every tenderness of action and utterance. Like his father, and all his father's other sons, he had small gift in mirth. It was therefore of interest to note that his Petruchio, Benedick, and Don Cæsar de Bazan were almost sufficient, by virtue of his vivacity, fire, and mental alertness, and, in the case of the last two characters, by the ele-

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gance and distinction of his manners and speech.

Through his Hamlet Edwin Booth made, upon the whole, his deepest and surest impression. In his performance of the part, there was retained to the last, consciously and deliberately, more of the old-fashioned formality and precision of style than he permitted himself in other impersonations, and the effect was sometimes that of artifice. But Mr. Booth elected to represent Hamlet in a style far less familiar and far more remote from ordinary life than he used for any other character in his large repertory. It was not that his Hamlet was all in one key; that its moods were not many and diverse; that the actor did not finely discriminate between the son, the prince, the courtier, the friend, the lover, the artist, and the wit. The contrary was true. It was as full of delicate and just differences as one could wish. But, through its prevailing quality, made

constantly prominent by the tragedian's methods, certain definite and necessary results were reached. Hamlet differs from Shakespeare's other tragic heroes both in his supernatural experience and in his unique spiritual constitution. The grim effects of jealousy upon Othello and of ambition upon Macbeth, the griefs which work their torture and their transformation upon King Lear, do not separate these men from others of the human family, — rather ally them with every human creature. But the bark of Hamlet's misfortunes is borne upon a current whose dark waters flow from the undiscovered country. Macbeth questions with witches and is visited by ghosts, but at every step his path is shown to be of his own making. To Hamlet, by the conditions of his life and his soul, is given the largest opportunity for choice, and the smallest power of choosing. Mr. Booth, with careful and scrupulous art and full success, attempted

thus to distinguish the Prince of Denmark from all the rest of the world. His eyes, after the fourth scene of the first act, never lost the awful light which had filled them as they looked upon his father's ghost; his voice never quite lost the tone which had vibrated in harmony with the utterances of that august spirit.

After all, there is a fine fitness in that closeness of association between Edwin Booth and Hamlet the Dane, which is to abide as long as the man and his art and his life are remembered. In his largeness and sweetness, his rare delicacy and sensibility, he was nobly human to the core, after the pattern of the most human of all the creations of the Poet. Like the melancholy prince, he was required to drink the bitter water of affliction, and to hold his peace when his heart was almost breaking ; and, in its extraordinary depth and reserve, his soul, even as Hamlet's and as Milton's,

“ Was like a star, and dwelt apart.”

XVI

TOMMASO SALVINI

MIDWAY of the *quinquennium mirabile* to which most of my reminiscences appear to be related, to wit, on the evening of Monday, November 24, 1873, Tommaso Salvini acted for the first time in Boston, appearing at the Boston Theatre as Samson, in Ippolito d' Aste's tragedy of that name. During his early engagements in America he was supported by a company who spoke only Italian. Afterward, beginning with the season of 1880-81, he played frequently in this country, and was the "star" of troupes otherwise composed of English-speaking actors. This bilingual arrangement was a monstrosity, and nothing short of Salvini's genius could have made the

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combination tolerable. During the season of 1882-83 Miss Clara Morris was his leading lady; in other years, Miss Prescott, Miss Wainright, Mrs. Bowers, and other reputable performers belonged to his supporting companies. In the spring of 1886 he appeared in *Othello* and *Hamlet* with Edwin Booth, who played *Iago* and *Hamlet* to Salvini's *Othello* and the *Ghost*.

For many of the most finely discriminating connoisseurs of acting, in this region, Salvini became the first and foremost of the histrionic artists of our day, and with nearly all "the judicious" he took, held, and holds a highly exalted position. His personality was the most splendid — the adjective is fit, and, indeed, required — that has illustrated the theatre of his time. When he was first seen here, the beauty and strength of his classic face, the grand proportions of his figure, and the vibrant, sympathetic sweetness of his voice — a voice as glorious as ever pro-

ceeded from a man — combined to overpower the observer and listener. As was said of Edmund Kean, “he dominated stage and audience completely.” His training in the Continental School had been thorough, and (in temperamental force, I doubt if he was surpassed by any player at any period of the world.) His acting was of the Latin order, not of the Teutonic or Anglo-Teutonic; it was, however, though always vital and strong, never extravagant; in gesture, though exuberant, it was not excessive; in its general method, it belonged to what, in choice from a poverty of terms, must be called the exhaustive rather than the suggestive school of art; there was in it not so high a solution of pure intellectuality as in Edwin Booth’s, but in its mastery, in the largest way and to the smallest detail, of the symbols of histrionic expression, it ranked, I think, above that of every other player whom the stage of America has known within

the past fifty years. Salvini was Charles Fechter carried up to the second power of all the Frenchman's virtues, with scarcely a hint of his limitations.

The Othello of Salvini was the assumption through which he most strongly impressed the public, by which he will be most widely remembered. Fully conscious of its magnificence and of the unequaled and terrible force of its passion, which in the third scene of the third act represents, perhaps, the highest conceivable stress of which humanity is capable, I personally preferred to it several of his other impersonations. It seemed to me that his Othello was Shakespeare orientalized and supersensualized, at the cost of some of the Master's heroic conception, and of much of the Poet's beautiful thought. Salvini knew that Othello was a Moor, and a Moor he would have him in body, soul, and spirit; not such a Moor as he might have discovered from the wondrous text,

but a tawny barbarian, exuberant with the qualities conventionally assigned to the race. His gloating over Desdemona ill became the lines which displayed the depth and chastity of the hero's love, and in the fierce savagery of his jealous rage, during the last half of the play, the imaginative grace and beauty of many passages were smothered and lost. In the murder of Desdemona, done with realistic horrors, and in Othello's suicide, effected, not with indicated dagger, but with a crooked scimiter and hideous particulars of gasp, choke, and gurgle, I perceived that both the letter and the spirit of Shakespeare were defied and defeated for sensational purposes.

But thirty years ago criticism of this sort fell, as now perhaps it falls, upon few ears that would hear; one of my friends said that such carping was like girding at Niagara. Salvini's Othello was undoubtedly stupendous and monumental. Leav-

ing Shakespeare and Anglo-Saxon scruple out of account, it was great; considered by itself, it was homogeneous and self-consistent, — “one entire and perfect chrysolite,” or, with a suitable variation of the Moor’s own phrase, one huge ardent carbuncle.

In witnessing the Italian dramas which Salvini produced, the spectators did not need to be troubled with Shakespearean doubts and qualms. His Samson, which he played on his opening night in this city, seemed to me a supreme histrionic expression of the emotional-picturesque. The play, which was in verse, freely dramatized the Biblical story of the Lion of Dan, had considerable merit, and was quite redeemed from commonplace by the character of its hero. In Samson’s mighty personality two individualities were fused: the giant, the man of blood, the slave of passion, was also the son of promise, the just judge, and, above all, the appointed

deliverer of God's people Israel. It was wonderful to see how Salvini's impersonation combined these two natures; expressing with sensuous fullness all that was gross and earthy in the man, and not less effectually displaying the lofty consciousness of the leader and commissioned servant of the Lord Jehovah. When directly under the divine inspiration, as in the second act of the play, when he perceived in the flames that consumed his house the presence of the I AM whom Moses knew in the burning bush on Horeb, the face and speech of the actor became glorious and awful in their consciousness of Divinity; and at lower moments, sometimes in the midst of unholy and degrading pleasures, a strange and mystical light seemed to fill his eyes, to touch and amplify his form. In his fatal drunkenness there was something godlike as well as pathetic, even while the details of intoxication were shown with remorseless truthfulness, — touches

of rare delicacy being made in the facial action accompanying the first draught of the "wine of Sorec," where the repulsion of the Nazarite for the forbidden cup was merged in his presentiment of coming ill. His declamation of Jacob's blessing of the tribe of Dan was like the tramp of a jubilant host. The long speech, in which he rehearsed in detail, with appropriate action, the story of his victory over the young lion that roared at him in the vineyards of Timnath, afforded by far the most signal illustration I have ever seen of the ability of an actor to reproduce in narrative a series of varied incidents. The performance had the effect of a set of biograph pictures, with the added vividnesses of ear-filling sound, and, somehow, of apparent color. Another almost equally remarkable and even more stirring triumph in a similar sort was Salvini's narrative, in *La Morte Civile*, of Conrad's escape from prison. No other actor of our day

was capable of either achievement. In the Biblical play his highest point was attained in the fourth act, when he discovered the loss of his hair and his strength; and here his cry of agony and his frenzied, vaguely grasping gesture, accompanying the words, "Gran Dio! La chioma mia! la chioma!" were indescribably thrilling and awful. His Samson was in its different aspects as closely human as the Ajax of Sophocles, as heroic and unhappy as *Œdipus*, as remote as the Prometheus of *Æschylus*.

Salvini's skill was as high in comedy as in tragedy. His impersonation of Sullivan, in the Italian play of which David Garrick is a replica, was ideally perfect, even surpassing Mr. Sothern's performance in grace, vivacity, and distinction. He played Ingomar occasionally, in the Baron Munsch-Bellinghausen's drama of that name, and filled the part to overflowing with humor and virile gentleness. His

interpretation of King Lear was of great merit, though some of the subtleties of the text did not reach him through the Italian version. His Hamlet was quite unsatisfactory to American audiences, and was seldom given in this country; but his performance of the Ghost far surpassed every other that our stage has known.

Without dealing with his other admirable assumptions, I wish to put myself on record for an opinion which is shared by hundreds of my fellow citizens. Salvini's impersonation of Conrad, the central personage of *La Morte Civile* of Paolo Giacommetti, has not been rivaled, has not been approached, by any dramatic performance of our time, in respect of pure and heart-searching pathos. The story is that of an Italian artist, Conrad, who, condemned to imprisonment for life for the commission of a crime of unpremeditated violence, after many years of confinement escapes from jail, finds his wife and daugh-

ter, both of whom had been saved from want by a kind and honorable physician, and learns that his daughter, now almost grown to womanhood, has received the name of her protector, and been brought up in the belief that the physician is her father. Though strongly drawn by natural instinct to make himself known to the girl, Conrad is persuaded, through a desire for his child's happiness and peace of mind, to conceal his relation to her; the supreme effort required for this sacrifice completes the work of his many sufferings and privations, and in it he dies. The character of Conrad is built upon a large plan. He is naturally a man of violent passions, capable of furious jealousy, easily wrought to suspicion, and by years of solitude and misery has been made sullen and morose. Yet the spirit within him is really great, and, possessed by the passion of paternal love, rises to such deeds and self-denials as might be sung by choirs of angels.

Every phase of the man's nature was presented by the actor with fine discrimination and full potency. But as the fiery soul was brought to its great trial, and prepared itself for the renunciation of its one hope and joy, the player's art took on an entrancing loveliness. From scene to scene Conrad's face was gradually transformed, its grim severity being replaced by a sober earnestness. The passage with his wife, in which they were united in their spirit of self-abnegation, where disappointment, desire, and grief swelled his heart almost to bursting, was deeply impressive, but served principally to lead the mind of the spectator to the last scene of all. What words can do justice to that, — to the exquisite pathos of his final interview with his daughter, when, struggling with the agony of imminent death, he endeavored, by caressing tones and timid gestures of tenderness, to excite an answering throb in the young breast, which

he would not press against his own, and, having borne the extremity of anguish and shame in her discovery upon his wrists of the flesh marks that told the disgrace of his captivity, found one moment of happiness in the offer of her childish prayers in his behalf? The pain depicted was so awful, the heart hunger so terrible, that the sight of them could not have been endured but for the glory and grandeur of the act of self-immolation. At the very last, the yearning in his hollow eyes as they glazed in death was almost insupportable, and was, indeed, so pitiful that the dread realism of the final moment, when the strong soul parted from the weary body, was felt as a relief. At the first performance of this play in Boston, I had the never paralleled experience of being one of a company of spectators whose emotion was manifested by audible gasping for breath, by convulsive choking

and sobbing; strong men being specially affected.

I must not lose the opportunity to declare the deep impression which was made upon me at this time by the acting of Signora Piamonti, who was the tragedian's leading lady during his first season in America. In none of the impersonations which she presented was the highest force required of her, and therefore I am not justified in pronouncing her the equal of Ristori or Bernhardt or Seebach. But in the large variety of her performances, which ranged from Ophelia in Hamlet to Zelia in Sullivan, — corresponding to Ada Ingot in David Garrick, — Signora Piamonti exhibited such grace, *adresse*, dramatic judgment, and vivid delicacy of style as the world expects only from players of the first rank. Her Ophelia was the most beautiful and poetic assumption of the character that I have witnessed, surpassing

by a little even Miss Terry's fine performance; and the achievement was especially remarkable because the Italian artist could not sing, and was obliged to interpret Ophelia's ballads in a kind of dry chant, or monotone; with occasional cadences. Better than any one of all the other players I have seen, many of whom well expressed the Dramatist's idea, Signora Piamonti made Ophelia's insanity lovely as well as pathetic, turning "thought and affliction, passion, hell itself, to favor and to prettiness," according to the word of the Poet. Her Desdemona was charming in its unaffected sweetness, and in its final passages indicated, with true tragic stress, the heroic loyalty of the wife, while preserving the feminine softness of the gentle Venetian. A striking contrast, whereby the breadth of her art appeared, was afforded by her impersonations of Delilah in Samson and Zelia in Sullivan. The latter was shown as a young girl of modern type,

fresh and unconventional, but of a character strongly based in purity, intelligence, and refined sensibility, — an ideal daughter of England, emotional, yet dignified and self-contained; the anxious, restless attention, crossed by shame and disgust, with which she watched the actor in the early moments of his pretended intoxication was a triumph of the eloquence of attitude and facial expression, interestingly followed by the voluble passion of her oral appeal to his nobler soul. Signora Piamonti's Delilah, though kept at every moment entirely within the lines prescribed by good taste and propriety, exhibited Samson's mistress and destroyer like some flaming flower of the voluptuous East, incarnadined in tint, heavy with aromatic odors, intoxicating to the sense of man, — the hireling slave of passion, yet almost redeemed at the last by the violent access of her remorse and self-loathing. Her final rejection of the Philistines' reward

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of her perfidy was so mixed of rage and shame as to seem strong even against the background of Salvini's tremendous performance.

XVII

ADELAIDE NEILSON

NO player in my time vied with Adelaide Neilson in respect of the keenness of the curiosity and the profuseness of the admiration of which she was the object. Both curiosity and admiration were justified. As a woman and as an artist she was difficult to account for. I do not pretend to know the truth about those portions of her life which have a dubious aspect. After she came to the fullness of her power the voice of disparaging gossip grew faint, as if there could be but one verdict, and that of approval, upon a personality which appeared so refined in every public manifestation. It is known that her baptismal name was Elizabeth Ann Brown; that she was born

in Leeds, March 3, 1848, and was the daughter of an actress of no great ability. As a young girl, she had employment in a mill, as a nurserymaid, as a barmaid, and as a member of a theatrical *corps de ballet* ; having been befriended, at the beginning of her career on the stage, by Captain, afterward Admiral, Henry Carr Glyn, a noted officer of the British navy. Through all the occupations just now mentioned she must have passed before she was eighteen years of age, since her début as Juliet was made at Margate in 1865. Her success was immediate, and her repertory soon embraced many parts in Shakespearean and other dramas. She made her first appearances in America and in Boston during the autumn and winter of 1872-73; and afterward, in a nearly unbroken succession of seasons, she acted in most of the chief cities of this country, until the winter of 1879-80. On the 15th of August, 1880, after many months of

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failing health, she died suddenly at the Chalet du Rond Royal, in the Bois de Boulogne. A considerable portion of her estate she bequeathed by will to Admiral Glyn. She acted frequently in England, also, during the last eight years of her life, appearing, in the course of one memorable engagement, in one hundred consecutive performances of Julia, in *The Hunchback* of Sheridan Knowles.

When Miss Neilson, at the age of twenty-four, first played in this city, her beauty and charm were on all sides declared to be of a rare and bewildering sort, and the public acclaim upon that theme was loud and sonorous. Her great ability, also, was obvious. It was easy to see that "the root of the matter" was in her ; that she possessed the true plastic quality of the actor, native histrionic discrimination, and extreme temperamental sensibility. But her style, at that time, lacked the highest distinction ; her voice, though usually very

pleasant in quality, had many unrefined nasal intonations; and in the interpretation of her text she frequently missed delicate opportunities, sometimes squarely blundered. It happened that she did not reappear in Boston till 1880, and connoisseurs of acting were then permitted to note the effect upon her of seven years of the experience and culture of the stage. The change was remarkable: she had gained greatly in vivacity and power, almost equally in breadth and suavity of style. Her voice had acquired an absolute clarity, with no loss of richness of tones. An extraordinary advance had been made in the finish of her work, which now exhibited, at almost every point and in almost every detail, an exquisite precision that testified to the operation of a clear and highly cultivated intelligence.

The evening of February 16, 1880, when, after the long absence referred to, she was once more seen in Boston, was an evening

to be much remembered by every star-long-suffering critic. At last a Juliet had appeared whose style was as large as it was passionate and sweet, — a Juliet who did not color the words “Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?” with hostility, sincere or affected; who did not fall into a twenty seconds’ ecstasy of terror because the orchard walls were high and hard to climb, and the place death to Romeo, considering who he was, if any of her kinsmen found him under her window; who did not get out of temper with her nurse, and emit her “By and by I come” like a blow from an angry fist; who did not rush on from “Dost thou love me?” to “I know thou wilt say ay,” as if she were mortally afraid that Romeo would say no, and proposed to stop his tongue in time; who did not exhibit all the symptoms of a blue funk of terror while the friar was describing the consequences of her drinking his potion. These *bêtises*, and many others like unto them,

some practiced for effect, some mere products of misunderstanding, we had endured at the hands and lips of many noted actresses. A large style here, suited to Shakespeare's large scheme! A style, that is to say, which takes into account, at every moment, not only the text by itself, but the text as it is related to all the other texts, and to the Juliet revealed by them in her many aspects and in her total definite personality. Not a studied, self-conscious Juliet, not a Juliet adorned with foreign excrescences, not a babyish, lachrymosal Juliet, but Shakespeare's own true love-taught heroine. Illustrations of her strong judgment, and of its coöperation with her delicate intuition, might be indefinitely multiplied: I cite only one other, which relates to a passage that crucially tests both the fineness and the strength of an actress's artist eyesight.

In the first act of *As You Like It*, Miss Neilson's treatment of Rosalind's conclud-

ing interview with Orlando was ideally expressive: the words, "Sir, you have wrestled well, and overthrown more than your enemies," were made to carry just as far as they ought, and no farther, — winging their message of incipient love to the young man's faithful ear, bravely, modestly, gravely, without smile or simper, it might fairly be said without a hint of coquetry.

It happened that Miss Neilson played at no time in Boston any other than Shakespearean characters, confining herself, during her early engagement, to Rosalind and Juliet. At her season here in February, 1880, she added to her record with impersonations of Viola and Imogen, presenting Cymbeline on the 23d of that month, for the first time here within twenty-four years. She returned to Boston for one week, two months later in the same year, and on the night of the 19th of April appeared as Isabella, in *Measure for Measure*, which

until then had not been performed in this city. Her impersonation of Imogen was masterly, the adjective befitting an interpretation whose gamut ran from high passionate force to the most delicate sensibility. In her interview with Iachimo she showed admirable judgment ; not falling into a frenzy at the disclosure of his baseness, but, in her repulse of the libertine, combining courage, scorn, and loathing, in a grand demonstration of womanhood and wifehood. Her loftiest point was reached in the scene with Pisanio, wherein she learned of her husband's mad disbelief and murderous purpose. Here, at first, a hundred shades of fond hope, of anxiety and alarm, were depicted in her face ; and when the blow fell from the letter of Posthumus, and she dropped to the earth as if she had been shot, her passion of grief seemed to pass beyond simulation, and in the speech beginning, —

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“ False to his bed ! What is it to be false?
To lie in watch there and to think on him?
To weep twixt clock and clock ? ”

honest indignation, outraged affection, and anguish were uttered, without a touch of rant or self-consciousness, in a cry that pierced the heavens and the listener's heart. The feminine sweetness and physical delicacy of Imogen were shown with true poetic grace; and among all the lovely images that the stage has shown, none is, I think, so appealingly lovely as that of Miss Neilson's Imogen as, emerging from her brothers' cave, she made her trembling declaration of hunger and honesty and her meek yet clear-voiced plea to the gentleness of the stout strangers.

I must not multiply details, especially as a difficult and more important attribution is to be attempted. More than once I have spoken of Miss Neilson's beauty, and of the general enthusiasm over that theme. In truth, her face was not distinguished by

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the regularity which the sculptor approves. Her forehead was broad and full; her eyes were softly brilliant, and their gray shifted into every appropriate color; her mouth, both firm and sensitive, had not the outline of the conventional Cupid's bow; her chin was pointed, and protruded a little from the profile line. In the one interview I had with her, she compared herself with a notoriously handsome English actress, concluding, with a frank laugh, "But *I* have n't a *featchur*, I know." Yet on the stage her beauty irradiated the scene. The explanation is easy. She had a countenance over which the mind and spirit had absolute control, in and through whose plastic material they uttered themselves without let or hindrance, making it their exponent rather than their veil, as if, by a mystical operation of the physical law, the force of the soul were transmuted into terms of flesh. These words, which sound extravagant, are simply true. One does not

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remember the beautiful Adelaide Neilson *in propria persona*: the figures and faces which are associated with her are those of Shakespeare's heroines, every one of them unlike every other, every one immortally beautiful. I suspect that, as a histrionic artist, she excelled not so much through swift impulses and inspirations as through her supreme docility, discretion, and responsiveness. She was always studying, evolving, and considering fresh ideas, eliminating old faults, taking on new excellences. She afforded in her person a rare example of artistic and mental development; and I have ventured to go so far in my thought — now confided to the reader — as to believe that of her intimacy with the pure and lovely conceptions of the Poet whom she sincerely revered she was making a ladder upon which her soul was mounting and to mount.

It remains to be said that, perhaps not for all, but certainly for very many persons,

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Miss Neilson as an actress possessed an ineffable charm, which has never been analyzed or explained. A signal illustration of this charm was afforded by her Viola, in *Twelfth Night*. Of all Shakespeare's women, Viola is the most elusive. Deeply reserved, void of initiative, confirmed in patience, exquisitely fine in all the texture of her nature, as pure as new-fallen snow, she is, however, not like Miranda, fearless with the ignorant innocence of Paradise, or Isabella, calm with the untempted chastity of the cloister, but is familiar with life and its lures, as well as susceptible of love and its enthrallment. Yet she passes through uncounted compromising situations without a smirch, and in her masculine attire is no less virginal-sweet than in her woman's weeds. Miss Neilson's performance said all this, and the much more there is to say, with an art that was beyond criticism; keeping the character well in the shadow to which it

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belongs, and at the point of highest tension, with a hundred deft touches, conveying the strength of the tender passion which could endure and smile at grief. But, aside from the distinction and charm, the subtilty and the depth, of the impersonation; aside, even, from the completeness with which the personality of the artist was transformed into that of Shakespeare's heroine, there was a quality in the performance by which it was related to some evanescent ideal of perfect beauty, to some vision of supernal loveliness vaguely apprehended but eagerly desired, through which it touched the infinite. Other of Miss Neilson's assumptions had a like power; but the manifestation through this character was singularly clear. More than once I saw scores of mature men and women gazing through eyes filled with sudden-surprising moisture at this slip of a girl, as she stood upon the wreck-strewn shore of the sea, in the midst of sailors, and

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began a dialogue no more important than this :—

“ *Vio.* What country, friends, is this ?

Cap. This is Illyria, lady.

Vio. And what should I do in Illyria ?

My brother he is in Elysium.

Perchance he is not drowned : what think you,
sailors ? ”

In that slender maid, as she looked through Adelaide Neilson’s eyes and spoke through her voice, the fairest dream of romance seemed incarnate ; in her the very “riches of the sea,” strangely delivered from its “enraged and foamy mouth,” had “come on shore.”

XVIII

MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE PLAYS AND ARTISTS

APPROACHING the end of these reminiscent sketches, the scenes of which must not be brought too near the foreground in time, I purpose to note several disconnected and contrasting experiences of stage and platform, which stand out in my memory by reason of some salient peculiarity. The moments of highest exaltation, among many lofty moments, which came to me at any concert of sacred music, were passed as I listened, at the Music Hall, in April, 1871, to Christine Nilsson's interpretations of "There were shepherds abiding in the fields" and "I know that my Redeemer liveth," in a performance of the Messiah given by the

Handel and Haydn Society. The former of the numbers named was, in her mouth, a piece of idyllic religious poetry, the Pastoral Symphony of the oratorio, informed with a soul, and uttered, as it were, through the voices of rapt men and jubilant angels. The latter was the only utterance of the centuries' great Song of Faith to which I had, or have, ever listened with entire satisfaction. Then, for the first time, I heard the spirit's assurance of immortality breathed from its depths, not argued with its lips. Here and there, as in the words "Yet in my flesh shall I see God" and "Now is Christ risen from the dead," the singer, as if overborne by a sudden ecstatic vision, broke forth with vehement intensity; but for the most part the words were sung as by a soul communing with the Almighty, not as by a man defending a doctrine against men. So, the customary conventional exaggeration of emphasis upon the "*I know*" was dis-

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carded, and the stress was thrown upon "liveth," which, by some swift alchemy of tone or accentuation, was charged with the fullness of the soul's conviction ; while, in the closing passages of the air, the words "the first fruits of them that sleep" ascended like the breath of one who longed to be with those that rest in the hope of a joyful resurrection.

Time is most relentless in effacing remembrance of the work of public readers. Let a strong word, then, be said for Levi Thaxter, who read the poems of Robert Browning in a fashion beside which all other attempts in that kind were, and yet are, prosaic, small, and faint. He was not a professional elocutionist, and his efforts were not deformed by mechanical artifice ; his voice was sweet, pure, and of extraordinary depth and reach, and his enunciation and pronunciation were elegantly faultless. The source of his peculiar power was in his full sympathy with poet and poem,

and in his firm grasp of their thought. His reading, as an illumination of the text, was marvelous, and fairly compelled Browning to be comprehensible, even in works as subtle and obscure as *La Saisiaz*. Mr. Thaxter's dramatic gift was nothing short of magnificent, and I put his reading of the dialogue of *Ottima and Sebald*, in *Pippa Passes*, in the same class, for force and completeness, with Mrs. Kemble's reading of the Shakespearean tragedies.

In quite another kind, but unique and highly remarkable, was the reading of Shelley's and Keats's poetry by Mr. William Ordway Partridge, now noted as a sculptor. Not much of the verse of Shelley will bear putting under the logician's press or into the analyst's crucible; but some of it is the fine wine of poetry,—poetry for poets, as has been cleverly said, appealing to the subtlest parts of the imaginative sense, as remote from the com-

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mon touch as a rosy cloud dissolving in a sunset glow. Mr. Partridge read Shelley as if he were the author as well as the interpreter of the verse. His refined and delicate beauty of face, intensified by a rapturous expression as if he were thrilled by the melody which he made; the clear tones of his cultivated voice, not widely varied in modulation, but perfect within a sufficient range; his absolute plasticity and responsiveness under the thrill of the music, combined to give his reading an exquisitely appropriate distinction. There was, indeed, in his delivery something singularly lovely and impossible to describe, — the product, apparently, of a gift, like Shelley's own, to charge mere sound with sense, so that it seemed to bear a message almost without the help of articulate utterance.

The reference to Mrs. Kemble suggests a contrast sharply noted in my mind a few years ago. As a very young man, I had the

keen delight of hearing Mrs. Fanny Kemble at one of the last series of readings which she gave in the Meionaon. I vividly recall the occasion when I listened to her delivery of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and was one of an audience which laughed itself almost faint over her interpretation of Falstaff. A middle-aged Englishwoman, in usual afternoon costume, read from an ungarnished platform, out of the big book which had come down to her from her aunt, Mrs. Siddons ! Some thirty years later I was present at Mr. Beerbohm Tree's opening night in Boston, and saw the leading actor — "made up" with extreme skill, assisted by an accomplished company, using all the appliances of an excellent stage — succeed in carrying the part of Sir John Falstaff, in the same comedy, through an entire evening without once evoking a laugh for his incomparably humorous text.

Another case of professional misfit, which

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worked less serious results, and, indeed, made a remarkable display of ingenuity, appeared during Miss Genevieve Ward's last engagement in Boston. The play was Henry VIII., Miss Ward impersonating Queen Katharine. Mr. Louis James, her leading man, was cast for Cardinal Wolsey. The cardinal's part is long and hard to learn, and very likely was new to Mr. James, whose position was onerous. He got through the evening without incurring or causing disaster. He hit his cues with necessary precision; and it is also true that he performed the astounding feat of presenting Wolsey's words in an original paraphrase *ex tempore*. Of the cardinal's lines not so many as one in three were exactly reproduced, even the most familiar sustaining some twist or variation. Sometimes the original text was entirely suppressed. But Mr. James's speech did not halt, and his mind demonstrated extreme adresse, furnishing his tongue with phrases

which carried a considerable portion of the Dramatist's meaning, and even fell decently in accord with the rhythmic scheme of the verse. William Shakespeare, or John Fletcher, or whoever is responsible for Wolsey's share of the dialogue, would have been tickled by the actor's performance, which was in the line of the "descant" that Elizabethan gentlemen were expected to be able to supply with the voice, upon any melody, at short notice.

Madame Janauschek is so near the present day that it has seemed best to me not to make her work the theme of extended comment. Her achievement on our stage was great, considering the handicap which she sustained in dealing with a foreign language; she had a large style, and her playing was steadily marked by intellectual clarity and emotional power. Her unique performance, the assumption of the French waiting maid, Hortense, in the stage version of Dickens's *Bleak House*, played

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under the name of Chesney Wold, is not likely to be forgotten by any who were so fortunate as to witness it. The French accents and intonations of the girl were made piquantly effective through the operation of a tongue more familiar with them than with English vocables, and the feline malice and alertness of the character — which in the novel is scantily outlined — were reproduced with high picturesqueness and vivacity.

By natural association with Madame Janauschek's achievement, there occurs to my mind the rarest example I have known of the fortunate fitting of an alien actor to a part in which all his lingual imperfections made for ideal success. On the evening of November 5, 1889, at the Tremont Theatre was performed a dramatic version of Mr. Howells's novel, *A Foregone Conclusion*, with Alexander Salvini as Don Ippolito. The play "was caviare to the general," and was obviously deficient in

constructive skill; but its gay wit, its lavish humor, — now frank and direct, now sly and ironical, — its intuitive schemes of character, its broad human sympathy, its reproduction of the atmosphere and beauty of Venice, and its literary distinction made its presentation delightful to the critical few. As for Alexander Salvini, — of whom, as an artist, I entertained, in general, a rather low opinion, finding him in his larger attempts pretty steadily commonplace, — his impersonation of Don Ippolito was a marvel. Every native physical peculiarity of the player repeated the figure of the romance, and the priest's Italianic English was the actor's very own dialect. It is to be added that the Don's timid sweetness, naïveté, and humility, and his shy yet substantial manliness, with their overlay of southern finesse, were clearly appreciated and nicely indicated.

The performance, on the evening of May 14, 1888, at the Park Theatre, of Mr.

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George P. Lathrop's drama of Elaine has taken a little niche of its own in my mind and memory. The play, which was in blank verse, had real merit : its text was always smooth, sweet, and graceful, and was fine or fervid in a mode much like that of Tennyson, the story of whose idyl was strictly followed until the final passages, when grave liberties were taken with Launcelot and Guinevere. The effect of the work and its representation was to transport the soul of the spectator out of the dusty glare of common day into the empurpled twilight of romance. Through Miss Annie Russell the play was supplied with an ideal Elaine. The actress had but recently recovered from a severe illness, and her fragile beauty and delicacy pathetically befitted the lily maid of Astolat. Her gentle speech had a thrilling quality which seemed made to utter the heart of Elaine. Few of those who saw the scene will forget how, after love for Launcelot

had entered her soul, she began to look at him with a gaze as direct as unhesitating, and as maidenly 'as full moonlight. At great moments the concentration and simplicity of her style exactly fulfilled the difficult conditions of the part ; the shudder with which she caught and held her breath when Launcelot kissed her forehead, the gasping pain of the sequent words, "Mercy, my lord," and the dry despair of her "Of all this will I nothing," will be long and deservedly remembered. Few more beautiful scenes have been shown upon the stage than the fifth tableau, which reproduced a famous picture, and exhibited the barge, draped in black samite, bearing the body of the maiden — pale as the lily which her right hand held, the "dead oar'd by the dumb" old servitor — upward with the flood.

XIX

AN AMERICAN THEATRE PRIVATELY ENDOWED

MY last word may well bear my message of desire and hope for the theatre in America. Some fourteen years ago, I began to contend in public for the establishment in one of our largest cities of a playhouse which should be supported or "backed" by the munificence of two or more men of great wealth and proportionate intelligence, — even as the Symphony Orchestra in Boston is maintained by one public-spirited gentleman. It is to be a *théâtre libre* in that it is to be absolutely absolved from slavery to its patrons and box office. As a place of edification, it is not to be a kindergarten for infants who still suck their sustenance

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from a "vaudeville" bottle, nor a primary or grammar school for small children, but a high school or university for adults, dedicated to the higher culture of that great "humanity," the histrionic art. For this house are to be engaged the best-equipped managers, and the most highly accomplished company of actors, artists, and artisans that the country can furnish; and on its stage are to be produced, with the closest attainable approximation to completeness, only clean plays, of real merit. These dramas are to be in every key and color, of any and every nation, of any period in time. Rare inducements will be held out for the production of new and original works, of which the censorship will be critical, yet catholic and un-niggardly; but there will be no limitation of the field to the domestic inclosure. This theatre once open and operant, let the dear public attend or not, as it pleases;

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and let the experiment be faithfully tried for three years.

From the effecting of such a scheme I did not expect, soon or ever, every conceivable advantage. I did not, in prevision, anticipate the speedy regeneration of the theatre as an "institution," the prompt suppression of cheap and vulgar plays, the immediate elevation of public taste. But I was confident—judging by the success of similar enterprises, and by the parallelism of European theatres maintained by national and civic subsidies or organized subscription—that salutary results would flow from a theatre thus maintained and managed. This playhouse would at once be the talk of the country ; and the city that contained it would soon be a dramatic Mecca, drawing to itself from every part of the land true amateurs of the drama and of acting. A standard of high excellence would be set up, and held up to view, in respect both of material of

programme and mode of representation. By and by our swift people would respond and appreciate." Before many years had passed, we should have our own American Theatre, evolving the material of a fine tradition, dedicated to the best expression of a great art; and by the time that point was reached, "Conservatories of Acting would be clustered about the new house, and be preparing to feed its companies with trained actors and actresses.

Much good ought eventually to come to the theatrical profession out of the maintenance of such a privately endowed theatre: first and obviously, through the higher esteem and appreciation which actors would then receive from the public; secondly, through the advance in means of training which would be open to neophytes. It will be a shame if we do not develop a great race of actors in this country. The American temperament is, I believe, the best adapted of any in the world

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for histrionic success. As a nation we unite English thoughtfulness, steadfastness, and aplomb with Gallic vivacity, intuition, and speed. It is true, as I said in a former article, that our native artists show extraordinary swiftness and sensibility and a very large mimetic gift, and that the general level of histrionic attainment is high, considering the desultory character of the instruction upon which a large majority of our players are obliged to depend. Therefore, not only very good, but the very best things are to be hoped for, when our admirable domestic material is treated by competent masters, in schools attached to a theatre of the highest grade.

It is hardly necessary for me to say that it is my idea that the leaven of such an American Theatre would work sooner or later in the lump as a discourager of the prevailing flimsiness and triviality of our public shows. Thus far, by the quality of the supply of plays proceeding from Ameri-

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can writers, one can gauge the quality of the demand. Our authors do not lack cleverness : Mr. Barnard, Mr. Belasco, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Howard, Mr. Gillette, Mr. Fitch, and others show real ability. But when one considers that Mr. Gillette's *Secret Service* — theatrically effective — represents the high-water mark, "up to date," of our playwriting ; that it is, so to speak, the *Hamlet* of American dramatic literature, it is evident that something is needed to direct our feet into other ways, if we aspire to any great achievements in this kind for our country.

There can be no doubt that the proposed theatre, if it became successful and permanent, would do something to develop and elevate public taste in respect of players as well as plays. It would be refreshing — especially in Boston, the naïf and omnivorous — to note a progress upward on this line. Apparently, the movement of late years has been in the other

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direction. I saw it noted as a remarkable circumstance, in one of my criticisms of Mr. Fechter and Miss Leclercq, more than twenty-five years ago, that the chief artists were called before the curtain "as many as five times" at the end of the most important act of a classic play. On the night when *Cyrano de Bergerac* was first produced in Paris, elderly men shouted their bravos, and, at the close of the third act, embraced one another, with tears of joy, crying out, "*Le Cid! Le Cid!*" If that spectacle, which is truly impressive, seems absurd to a Bostonian, what has he to say to one of his own first-night audiences, which, a few years since, brought a pleasing little actress, who had done a bit of pretty comedy gracefully and piquantly, seventeen times to the footlights, midway of the performance, bestowing such honors and plaudits upon the player as she would scarcely have deserved if she had been Miss Neilson and Miss Cushman rolled

into one, and doing her greatest work in a play of commanding power ?

As a mere Bostonian, indeed, I should like to see some uplifting agency brought to bear upon the taste of my native town. New York, though cynical and capricious, and scandaled by a clamor which charges some of its newspapers with bondage to some of its theatres, has developed a taste of some fastidiousness and discrimination. Boston stays childishly greedy, the pet of all the theatrical managers, with whom it ranks as "the first show town" of America, — the place, that is to say, whose patronage for every form of theatrical entertainment, bad and good, is surest and, in proportion to its size, largest.

A better day for the drama and the theatre in America is sure to dawn. The actors are readier than the public for a change to nobler conditions; and the public, now learning to demand of and for itself the best things in many departments of life,

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will not always rest content with conditions that encourage mediocrity, and do discourage vulgarity, in that Theatre upon which it depends for the larger part of its entertainment.

XX

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TO say that of all the actors who have appeared in this country Mr. Irving is the hardest to criticise fairly and intelligently is to state a vexatious truth with extreme moderation. The leading English critics, after years of familiarity with his acting, are still puzzled by it, and find a difficulty, which seems almost exactly proportioned to their acuteness and candor, in analyzing it and in accounting for its effects. And the problem is complicated, or appears to be complicated, for Americans by the introduction of a peculiar factor: this is the necessity, immediately imposed upon us by Mr. Irving and his friends, of setting off our knowledge of his slowly won success

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against any lively dissatisfaction which may attend our early impressions of his performance. His great success is indeed not to be doubted; but the amplest knowledge on this head will include the facts that even in England there are a small number of persons, of a high intellectual order, who detest and abhor his playing, and that everywhere, in the best English society, "to admire him without reserve is held eccentric to the verge of affectation." As for the deprecation which is used by Mr. Irving's admirers to quench the anticipated violence of our first displeasure, surely the like of it was never before known in the case of an actor. "Be patient with his mannerisms" is the innocent and slender phrase employed; but this is presently found to bear an awful burden of meaning. We find that we are asked to forgive, under the name of mannerisms, sins which we have always accounted unpardonable in a dramatic artist. It is much, it seems at first

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blush, as if an amateur of painting were to say, "You will be delighted with M. Blank's pictures. He has some unpleasant mannerisms, to be sure, — his coloring is poor and his drawing incorrect; but in spite of these, you are sure to like his work." Or as if an acquaintance were to recommend for confidential clerk a young man who was a little weak on the score of honesty and accuracy, but, aside from these trifling mannerisms, had every desirable qualification. The view which a majority of Mr. Irving's American auditors naturally take, at first, of his most conspicuous faults is highly unfavorable. It is, indeed, the view which the more critical portion of his English audiences took when they were beginning to make his acquaintance. And the difference in the attitudes of the French and the English nations towards the art of acting cannot be better indicated than in this: that Mr. Irving, in spite of his faults, is to-day accepted and recognized as the

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greatest actor of his land; while, if he had been a Frenchman, he and his "mannerisms" would not have been tolerated on the Parisian stage for a month, and probably not for a single performance.

In Mr. William Archer's exceedingly brilliant "study" of Mr. Irving, which was printed in London a few years ago, it was said that the English critics, "obeying an inevitable tendency of dramatic criticism," have "made Mr. Irving a law unto himself." In this country, the dangers attendant upon close familiarity with the actor do not beset us; and I plead an American's "innocence of eye" — to use Mr. Ruskin's happy phrase — in extenuation of my somewhat premature attempt to determine Mr. Irving's rank as an artist. The disadvantages of slight acquaintance with the actor, on the part of the general audience or the particular critic, are of course plain. But it is most interesting and suggestive to see how swiftly and how

completely the story of Mr. Irving's later career in England has been repeated in America. Twenty years or more of London have already been epitomized in a year of New York, Boston, and Chicago. We also now have a small but knowing faction who violently reject and refuse him, denying him even the name of actor; a large and fashionable class who are inclined to demonstrate their culture by taking him as the object of a cult; a great public who accept him, with all his demerits, as an artist of remarkable parts and powers. In other words, Mr. Irving has met with full and hearty recognition in America, and with a remarkable measure of success. And although the voice of fierce dispraise is not and never will be quite silenced, the number of conversions which have been made from the ranks of his early detractors is comically large. The "heretics," who used to go to scoff, already remain, as Mr. Archer says, "not, perhaps, to pray, but

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at least to reflect and qualify their unbelief."

Let us swiftly, but not carelessly, review the grosser blemishes of Mr. Irving's style. I do not find these so offensive that I cannot endure them for the sake of becoming familiar with his art, though it is an odd experience to subject one's self to a hardening process as the condition precedent of sensitiveness and insight ; but, on the other hand, I earnestly protest against any and every attitude of mind in Mr. Irving's auditors which shall result in their disregarding or tolerating his more atrocious offenses. Mr. Irving, as has been succinctly said, can "neither walk nor talk." Amazing paradox, — of which "the time" now "gives proof," — that the most successful and cultivated of English actors should not have mastered the rudiments of his art ! Whatever explanation or apology there may be, the fact remains, and its enormity cannot be gainsaid. He

has been on the stage the larger part of his life, and yet he has not learned how to sit, stand, or move with the ease, repose, vigor, and grace which are by turns or all together appropriate to attitude or action; and, worse even than this, he does not know how to speak his own language. He has many lucid intervals of elegant motion and pure speech, — trebly exasperating as a demonstration that his faults are not the consequence of utter physical incapacity, — but he can never be quite trusted with his legs, his shoulders, or his tongue for five consecutive minutes. His ungracefulness is bad, but, as was just now implied, it is a venial fault in comparison with his atrocious enunciation. If there were such a crime as *lingua-matricide*, Mr. Irving would have suffered its extreme penalty long ago; for night after night he has done foul murder upon his mother-tongue. Soon after his arrival in New York, Mr. Irving was reported to

have said that he hoped the Americans would not be intolerant towards any English mannerisms of his speech which might offend their unaccustomed ears. If he said this, and said it seriously, the remark may be taken as a curious proof of his unconsciousness of the peculiarities of his delivery. For his oddities of utterance are no more English than they are Choctaw ; sometimes they suggest Cornwall, sometimes Devonshire, occasionally northern Vermont. But such hints are given by fits and starts ; the dialect is always substantially his own, an Irving *patois*, developed out of his own throat and brain through the operation of the familiar law of the survival of the unfittest. An alternate swallowing and double-edging of consonants, a frequent lapse into an impure nasal quality, an exclusion of nearly all chest tones, the misdelivery of the vowels by improper prolongation or equally improper abbreviation, an astonishing habit of con-

founding and confusing different vowel sounds, are the most marked of his disagreeable peculiarities. The great broad vowels are the ones which fare the worst in Mr. Irving's mouth, and the reform of his delivery must therefore be regarded as hopeless ; an actor of middle age whose chief pronunciations of "face" are fããāce and fẽãāce, and of "no" are não and nawo, is past praying for in this regard. Yet it is a part, and an important part, of the duty of the stage to be a pronouncing dictionary of the language, to bear aloft the standard of correct and elegant speech, and to make a constant appeal to the public ear in behalf of pure and refined enunciation. This function of the stage is one which the unmitigated partisans of Mr. Irving regard with supremely contemptuous indifference. Indeed, they go much further, and, with more or less careless expressions of regret at his mannerisms, speak of his faults in this kind as super-

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ficial and unessential ; of elocution as a matter of form, and not of substance. And they constantly inquire whether the spirit within the artist is not of more importance than the character of the tool with which he works. The inquiry is pertinent, the correct answer obvious, the figure employed a good one. An actor is like a painter, and the soul of the limner is of much more consequence than the shape of his implements. But if the artist has only a boot-brush and a palette-knife to work with, his soul will find great difficulty in giving expression to its inspirations. Mr. Irving's acting often reminds me of the work of such a painter. It is a perpetual annoyance to see how ill his hand and tongue subserve his purposes; how the poorness of his tools is shown in dull or ugly lines ; in other words, how his absurd enunciation disables and discredits his thought. It is necessary to go even further. Mr. Irving's elocution is

bad in other and perhaps more important ways than those already indicated : his voice possesses very little resonance, and almost no richness of tone ; it is high-pitched and has a narrow range ; he seems absolutely incapable of *sustained* power and variety in speech, and the inevitable consequence is that his declamation, especially of long passages, is exceptionally weak and ineffectual. The trouble with the artist here lies in the want of something more important than a delicate brush ; he has no proper assortment of colors to choose from, — little more, indeed, than plain black and white, — and Mr. Irving's work under these conditions, when he aims at very strong effects, seems like the attempt of a painter in monochrome to reproduce the complicated beauty of a sublime scene in nature.

That the most conspicuous English-speaking actor of the day should be thus poorly equipped for his work may well be

the subject of wonder to every thoughtful person. A scrutinizing glance at the man will furnish some new matter for wonder, but will also afford the beginning of an explanation of his remarkable hold upon the public. The tall, slender, flat-chested figure ; the high forehead defined at its base by strongly marked and exceedingly flexible eyebrows ; the large, positive nose ; the narrow, sensitive lips ; the long, thin jaw ; the large, deep-set, darkly-luminous eyes, belong to a most striking and impressive personality. Speaking for myself, I should say that Mr. Irving's face is without exception the most fascinating I have seen upon the stage. Once beheld, it will not out of the memory ; and I find, upon sifting my recollections, that, when there is no deliberate effort of my will, his face appears to me, not under the distorting or glorifying transformations of the stage, but with its usual look of quiet and somewhat sad thought-

fulness. It is a countenance obviously not adapted for all parts, perhaps not appropriate for many ; but wherever it is seen it immediately constrains and inflexibly retains the attention of the spectator. There is no impropriety in saying that this peculiar charm seems to grow out of the nature of the man himself, — out of a rare and lofty refinement, a subtile and delicate intellectuality, a largeness and sweetness of nature. The quality of refinement, indeed, makes itself felt in everything which Mr. Irving does or says; strongly appealing, I have observed, even to persons of no special cultivation ; marking the tone of his ordinary speech, whether the sound be agreeable to the ear or otherwise; never forsaking his delivery when his enunciation is most uncouth ; and clinging like a faint odor, in spite of all the artist's fumigating processes, to such repulsive impersonations as his Dubosc and his Louis. For the purposes of the dramatic art, Mr. Irving's

face is found to be singularly well adapted, within the limits which will presently be shown, to the indication of fear, disgust, suspicion, malice, envy, superstition, and hatred, and to be incomparably well fitted for the expression of dignity, reserve, and melancholy. It is capable of gentle but not poignant pathos, of a certain sort of unmirthful intellectual mirth, and scarcely at all of heroic scorn, wrath, frenzy, despair, or exaltation. Mr. Irving uses gesture sparingly, — a fault, if it be a fault at all, which is near akin to a virtue, — and not in such a way as to contribute to the vivacity or significance of his text ; a statement which at once demands qualification in favor of some half dozen bits of brilliant or beautiful illustrative gesture which I can recall, and nearly all of which are divided between Hamlet and Shylock. In the art of fencing, if one may judge by the duel of Hamlet with Laertes, Mr. Irving is a master ; and the

evidence given in that scene of the docility of the actor's muscles as the result of his training is to be added to the mass of inconsistent testimony which makes Mr. Irving the least comprehensible of actors in respect to his professional equipment.

The prime distinctions of Mr. Irving's acting and the chief sources of its effectiveness and charm are its intensity, its artistic propriety, and its intellectuality; all these being, of course, derived or reflected from the artist's mind. By intensity I mean here that quality which results from the actor's capacity of delivering himself and all his forces and faculties, without reservation, to the demands of the character which he assumes. The sum of Mr. Irving's powers is much less than that of many other great players, but I have never seen an actor whose absorption in his work was so nearly complete and unintermitted as his. He never trifles, never forgets himself, never wearies, never relaxes the

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grip which he at once takes upon his part. It may be Hamlet or Mathias, Charles I. or Louis XI., Lesurques or Dubosc: from the moment of Mr. Irving's first appearance he gives up to its service "the execution of his wit, hands, heart." That this intensity is accompanied by indications of self-consciousness in the actor, and that every such indication impairs the worth of his work, is true; but the injury in this kind is much less than any one, upon a merely theoretic consideration of Mr. Irving's art, would believe to be possible. His absolute sincerity of purpose is indeed the burdock which heals most of the wounds made by the nettle of self-consciousness. The dramatic consequence of such a high intensity is obviously great, but the value of the quality in holding the attention of audiences is inestimable. The spectator soon discovers that it will not do to skip any part of the performance; that if he leaves Mr. Irving out of sight or out

of mind for a single second he may lose some highly significant look or action. The impersonation of Mathias, in *The Bells*, best illustrates this, perhaps, although any one of his assumptions would serve almost equally well. There are but two prominent ideas in the part of Mathias: remorse for the commission of a murder, fear of detection and punishment. Through Mr. Irving's utter self-surrender, these thoughts are present in every moment of his effort, each portion of which bears the same relation to the whole that a drop of water bears to a bucketful. Or, rather, the spirit of the character may be said to pervade the representation as the soul, according to certain metaphysicians, pervades the body, "being all in the whole and all in every part." So that it is not extravagant to say that the nervous apprehension of an undetected criminal is to be seen in every look, movement, and tone of Mr. Irving's Mathias, from his entrance

on the stage to the last instant of his death agony; appearing as obviously to the view when he tenderly embraces his daughter as when, in talk, he nervously courses around his secret, or turns into a statue of anguish and terror at the imagined sound of the memory-haunting bells.

Mr. Irving's artistic sense is exceedingly just and delicate, and is an ever-present factor in his performance. In witnessing eight of his impersonations, I never saw it fail him, except occasionally in a presentation of Doricourt, in *The Belle's Stratagem*, which was given at the close of a very fatiguing engagement. This faculty in Mr. Irving is pictorial, — nothing about him or his art being in any sense statuesque, — and makes him, with the help of his intensity, the most entirely picturesque actor of our time. Mademoiselle Bernhardt has a gift of like nature, but not equally high in quality or large in measure. In all his assumptions there is an abundance of

delicate shading, of careful adjustment and contrast, of nice relation between parts; no touch is made so much for its own sake as for its contribution to the general effect; and though the inability to use grand and immediately effective strokes marks one of Mr. Irving's peculiar limitations, the difference, in this respect, between his work and most of the popular performance, with its vulgar and violent sacrifice of the truth and beauty of nature to the frenzy for making points, is very striking, and altogether in his favor. In his finest efforts his skill in this kind is masterly, and fills the appreciative spectator with the liveliest pleasure. Among these, Louis XI. stands easily first, and Dubosc, of The Lyons Mail, is second, with no long interval. A more thorough and complete embodiment of wickedness than the former impersonation — of cunning, cruelty, sensuality, treachery, cowardice, and envy, each vice being subordinate to a passionate

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superstition, which it feeds, and by which, again, it is fed — can hardly be conceived. Every utterance of the strident, nasal voice, with its snaps and snarls, its incisive tones of hatred, its hard notes of jealousy, its cold accents of suspicion, its brief touches of slimy sweetness when a saint is to be propitiated by devotion, or a foe is to be destroyed by flattery; every movement of the false, sneering, lustful lips; every attitude of the feeble frame, which in the midst of its decrepit ugliness has instants of regal dignity; every one of the countless expressions of the eyes and eyebrows, with their wonderful power of questioning, qualifying, searching, doubting, insinuating, and denying, — of all these and many more details in this marvelous picture, each one is absolutely true to life; each one has its own place and significance, and its own precise relation to the general effect; none is exaggerated or unduly intrusive. A finer, truer, and more artistic

adaptation of means to ends than this has not been seen upon the stage within our time. Dubosc is as depraved a character as Louis: but in the robber of the Lyons mail-coach reckless courage replaces timidity; violence alone does the work which the king divides between it and chicane, and the element of superstition is wanting. The professional thief and murderer is of course less varied and interesting than the kingly member of his guild. But Mr. Irving's portraiture of the former is of comparatively less dramatic worth for that reason, and no other. His Dubosc is perfect in its kind, and the contrasts between it and Louis serve to exemplify not only the keen discrimination of the actor, but the fine propriety and thoroughness of his artistic sense. The theme is low, but there is a high and legitimate æsthetic pleasure in the contemplation of such a creature as Dubosc, when face, carriage, speech, and action, the very

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movement of the hands in the division of booty, the kick and sprawl of the legs in the recklessness of drunken joy, are vivid tints in a picture of magnificently complete ruffianism. The personation of the king, in Mr. Wills's tragedy of Charles I., also offers many fine illustrations of the same artistic quality in Mr. Irving, and I regret that I have no more space than will suffice for a mention of its melancholy beauty, its refinement, and the exquisite gentleness of manner which waits upon its regality of soul.

But the principal source of Mr. Irving's professional power and success lies in the character and quality of his intellect. Many of our native players, both of tragedy and comedy, are persons of decided mental force; but Mr. Irving appears to me to demonstrate by his performances his right to the first place in the scale of pure intelligence, among all the actors of every nationality whom I have seen, Mr. Edwin

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Booth and Madame Ristori holding the positions next in honor. It is an old axiom of the dramatic art that temperament is of the first, second, and third consequence in the actor. Mr. Irving does not shake my faith in this truth, but I admit that his career goes far to show that, in exceptional cases, the intellect may successfully 'take upon itself a considerable part of the burden which is usually borne by other portions of the artistic nature. It makes, of course, the greatest difference what kind of a mind is in question, for much more than mere mental strength will be required. Mr. Irving's intelligence seems to be of remarkable power, breadth, subtilty, and keenness; it is morally supplemented by a fine patience and devoted persistence; it includes a genuine inventive faculty; it is enriched by careful cultivation." The highest dramatic temperaments conceive and represent character through the exercise of a reproductive and creative

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faculty which is like the poet's.⁴⁸ Similar results may be reached through the deliberate, cumulative work of the mind, which first analyzes the character, and then, piece by piece, fabricates an imitation; and the mental gifts required for such a process of analysis and simulation are of a rare and varied sort. That there is an immense delight in encountering such an intelligence as this upon the stage, no one will deny. Its noblest and loftiest exercise must inevitably be had in the presentation of Shakespeare; and here Mr. Irving's work becomes, in every matter where pure intellect and refined scholarship can avail, a subject for the profoundest satisfaction. His skill in arranging the scenes and in cutting the dialogue is admirably good, and his reverent regard for the accepted text is scarcely less excellent than his brilliant ingenuity in varying the text of doubtful passages. In playing Hamlet, his mental power and

learning have their highest exemplification. No character in Shakespeare, with the possible exceptions of King John and King Lear, asks, "in the true performing of it," such variety, penetration, subtilty, and sensitiveness of mind as the accomplished Prince of Denmark. Simply to understand his plainer speech is much, for Hamlet's meaning does not often lie near the surface. But to follow all the twists and turns of his swift-pacing wit, even before it shows the disorder of real or pretended disease; to feel, as the condition precedent of reproducing them, the contrasting glow and gloom of his wondrous imagination; to justify his incoherence by exhibiting the missing links of thought which his indifference or ecstasy so often drops; to display the deep affectionateness which the keener intuition discovers under all his masks; to show the superfine sanity which constantly characterizes his wildest utterances, and yet to indicate his dangerous nearness to

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that madness with which "great wit ever is allied;" and finally, to exhibit a character that, in spite of all the contradictions with which the master-poet has chosen to fill it, shall yet be human, lovable, and reasonably comprehensible, — these are tasks which require the most searching, refined, and patient intelligence; and by their accomplishment Mr. Irving proves his mental quality beyond dispute, and his ability to grapple with any dramatic difficulty which a well-furnished brain can overcome. The artist's intelligence, in this impersonation, constantly shines with electric clearness, and it seems to me that there is scarcely a sentence which does not receive a new illumination from his action or utterance. Even soliloquies, which of course suffer under his poor elocution, are thought out so lucidly and given with such care — though always as if the actor were thinking aloud, and not "speaking a piece." — that they often disclose new

beauties and new meanings. Exquisite taste, as well as acumen, constantly appears in an unerring sense of the relation of each speech to every other, to every personage and the whole play, and in the subordination of his own part, when, as in the first long scene with the Ghost, a temporary effacement of himself is due to the artistic needs of the situation. The melancholy of the Prince is of a sort which Mr. Irving is singularly well fitted to reproduce, through the cast of his countenance, the quality of his voice in its low tones, and the bent of his temperament; and with Hamlet's habits of introspection and metaphysical speculation the actor's sympathy is most intimate and profound.

It must be remembered, as a practical qualification of all which has been said of Mr. Irving's intensity, artistic perception, and mental force, that these noble qualities are sorely let and hindered, in their operation upon the stage, by the faults of style

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and method to which I have called attention, except only in the performance of parts like Louis and Dubosc, where his eccentricities are as often helpful as hurtful. Yet I have meant it to appear that Mr. Irving, in spite of his faults, is, in my opinion, the most purely intellectual, the most picturesque, and perhaps, on the whole, the most interesting of modern English-speaking actors.¹¹ The adjective "interesting" gives the cue for a plain statement of his peculiar limitations.¹² I have never seen a performer that aspired to the name of tragedian who was so deficient as he in the higher emotional force and in sustained passionate power.¹³ Except in his gift of dealing with the supernatural, — by which, in Mathias, he makes a tremendous attack upon the nerves, and in Hamlet finely affects the imagination, — he is an extraordinarily *light* actor in so far as he appeals to the feelings. Many a poor player, who is immeasurably below

him in refinement, taste, and learning, is his superior in this respect. The want from which the difficulty grows is deep-seated, and is, I am convinced, nothing else than a lack of that temperamental solidity and force out of which alone the actor's most potent lightning can be forged. It is not necessary for the purposes of passion that this force should be accompanied with what Mr. Irving's idolaters sneeringly denominate "robustiousness." The sinew and muscle — the brawn, if you please — of which I speak is in the will and heart and imagination, not in the arms and legs. If one seeks it in its grandest form to-day, it is to be found in Signor Salvini, who in intellect is but little inferior to Mr. Irving, and in artistic faculty is decidedly above him ; but it filled the genius of the pigmy Edmund Kean, and it is abundant in our own slender Mr. Booth. It lies at the root of the ability both to conceive and to express the greatest human emotions ;

it is the source of the pure, pathetic faculty; it is essential to a complete mastery of the spectator; it gives the eagle's tireless wing to the actor's impassioned speech. I have already alluded to Mr. Irving's inability, through lack of elocutionary variety and strength, either to attain or to sustain the effects of noble declamation; but his entire performance displays, through an unbroken series of phenomena, the want of that temperamental impetus of which his feeble speech and his monotonous repetition of the rhythmic nod of the head, the dull stamp of the foot, and the queer clutch of the breast in exacting passages are but single symptoms. Mr. Irving's style has in no respect the sustained quality; it is, so to speak, altogether staccato; there are no sweeps or long strokes in it, but everything is accomplished by a series of light, disconnected touches or dabs, the total effect of which, when the subject is not too lofty, is agreeable and harmonious. As for

his loftier-reaching passion, it has the flight, not of the storm-defying eagle, but of the short-winged, often-resting domestic fowl. Mr. Irving's selection of parts for performance in America affords a pretty sure indication of his consciousness of his limitations. But every one of the impersonations which he has given here furnishes evidence, directly and indirectly, of the truth of my thesis. 'The appeal which he makes is generally to the intellect or the artistic sense; he goes higher only when he must, and then he almost always fails. 'Louis and Dubosc are "character parts," and are natural and proper subjects for picturesque treatment. But Mr. Irving does not attempt to make anything more of them, and their malevolent wickedness, which an actor of emotional genius might use to fill the spectator with loathing and abhorrence, is a purely æsthetic delight to the most sensitive observer of his interpretation. Charles I. is an exquisite portrait, painted

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with beautiful softness and tenderness of tints, and is mildly touching in its melancholy dignity ; but its opportunities for poignant pathos are neglected, or frittered away. In Shylock Mr. Irving makes his most conspicuous failure in this kind. There are some very strong points in his impersonation, and the outlines of the character are drawn with a firm and skillful hand ; but the stress of the Jew's great passion is scarcely hinted at, except through the grim reserve of the latter half of the trial scene, and the explosions of his volcanic nature are accompanied by nothing more than a little rattle and steam. Mr. Irving's Hamlet is not far from being an exception to the rule which has been laid down ; but upon close scrutiny, I think it will not be found to weaken the force of what I have urged. It shows, indeed, the highest reach and amplest scope of the actor's intelligence ; but I venture to differ from Mr. Archer, the critic, by asserting

that Hamlet is not essentially heroic, and, on the contrary, is a "character part." That Hamlet is eminently picturesque is obvious; that he is not a character of sustained passion is equally obvious, inasmuch as infirmity of will is his chief moral trait. At all events, it is certain that Mr. Irving follows the lighter method in his impersonation, and that his success in it is won chiefly through the variety, vivacity, and delicacy with which he represents the picturesque side of the Prince's nature. Upon a review of Mr. Irving's efforts, it will even be seen, not only that he has no capacity for displaying vigorous, sustained passion, but that he never attains a lofty, emotional pitch, even for a moment. In all his performances, I can recall but one instance to the contrary, and that, as all my readers know, occurs just before the close of the "play scene" in Hamlet, where his snaky wriggle towards the King, his scream of triumph and wrath, and his frenzied but

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regal action in mounting the throne and holding it, as if he had just dispossessed a usurper, always produce a strong thrill in the audience. The instance, however, is isolated, and it is curious to note that Mr. Irving accomplishes all the best of the effect of the scene without the help of any comprehensible speech. If further proof were wanting of the lightness of Mr. Irving's emotional gift, it might be found in the uniform demeanor of his audiences; those of America repeating, according to my experience, the behavior of those of London, who, if Mr. Archer's keen eyesight is to be trusted, are almost always "intellectually interested, but not emotionally excited." That Mr. Irving ever attempted *Macbeth* and *Othello* seems impossible; that he should ever presume to attempt *King Lear* is incredible.

My conclusions, then, are these: that Mr. Irving's art would be much more effectual than it is if "to do" were one half

“as easy” with him as his knowledge of “what were good to do” is clear; that if abundance, brilliancy, clearness and refinement of thought, artistic insight, definiteness of purpose, sincerity of feeling, and intensity of devotion were all that is needed in a player, he would be easily first among the actors of our time; that, since the highest end of acting is not to refresh and stimulate the mind, to refine and gratify the taste, or to charm the fancy, but strongly to move the spirit and profoundly to stir the heart, his claim to a place among the greatest masters of his craft is not as yet made out.” After all is said, I find there is a certain charm in his performance which has not been accounted for, which defies analysis, and refuses even to be described, but which is strangely potent upon the imagination of the spectator. That his existence in the dramatic profession, even as he is, with all his imperfections on his head, is an inestimable

boon to the stage of England and America seems to me quite clear, inasmuch as it is impossible that his peculiar faults should find many imitators. And, looking at Mr. Irving, the most advanced English student of the drama may find one obvious compensation for the absence of a conservatory like that of Paris, and of a theatre like the Français: for in the destruction of his mannerisms, which must have made a part of Mr. Irving's pupilage, the artist himself would surely have perished, as the heroine of Hawthorne's most fanciful story died under the process of obliterating the birthmark from her cheek. To Mr. Irving's marvelous skill in setting and adorning his stage, and in guiding his supporting performers, — a skill which seems to amount almost to genius, — I can make only this brief allusion. Our public are not likely to forget that they owe to him representations of Shakespeare which have done more to educate the community, and

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have given, on the whole, more complete satisfaction and refined pleasure, than any others which the American stage has ever known.

The criticism which precedes this paragraph was printed in the Atlantic Monthly of March, 1884, a few months after Mr. Irving's first appearances in this country. Since that time he has had several seasons in America, and our theatre-attenders and critics have had many opportunities to consider and reconsider the quality of his art. Rereading my essay, I have decided to reprint it with no substantial change, inasmuch as I find that no substantial change of my opinions has taken place *ad interim*, though my general summing-up would now be less favorable to Mr. Irving than then it was. In the class of actors worthy to be entitled "great," I know of no other player than he whose appeal is effec-

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tual with the spectator almost wholly through the sense of the picturesque, or through what a writer of the eighteenth century would denominate the softer sensibilities. Neither in the view nor the retrospect does his acting make the blood jump, deeply stir the heart, or produce any of the higher emotions: one remembers him principally as a crisper of the nerves and a pleaser or tingler of the retina.

The more important characters added to Mr. Irving's repertory in this country since he first played here are Dr. Primrose in Mr. Wills's dramatic version of *The Vicar of Wakefield*; Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, reconstructed for the modern British market; Robespierre in Sardou's melodramatic tragedy of that name; and *Macbeth*. The writer manifestly underrated the artist's courage, inasmuch as Mr. Irving did perform both *King Lear* and *Macbeth* in England, and made the latter character the prime feature of a recent

American engagement. None of these assumptions showed Mr. Irving in any new lights. His Dr. Primrose was suave, benignant, and winning, the combination of simplicity, rusticity, nobility, and essential refinement of Goldsmith's creation being beautifully reproduced. Mephistopheles was intellectually interesting and spectacularly effective. Robespierre was chiefly valuable because of the shrewd skill with which the softer side of the terrible patriot was contrasted with his hard cruelty.

Mr. Irving's *Macbeth*, which was first shown in America during the season of 1895-96, was what might have been expected in every particular of its strength and its weakness. It was admirably self-consistent, and at its highest moments was briefly pathetic or fantastically impressive. The Scottish soldier, assassin, and usurper was presented as a subtle, crafty hypocrite, introverted, superstitious, sneakish, void of moral scruple, almost wanting in physical

courage. Nearly all the greatest commentators have agreed that Macbeth, after the murder of Duncan, grows steadily and rapidly harder and tougher, always strong in imaginative vision intellectually, but less and less capable even of high or unselfish conceptions, his whole nature sustaining hideous induration and decadence. But Mr. Irving in the first two acts so slurred the better elements in Macbeth's character that there was no possible interest to be taken in the struggle between the powers of good and evil in his soul; and, after his great crime, he appeared not different in substance from what he was before, or, rather, by a strange perversion and inversion of the scheme of the text, he was shown not as firmer, but softer, of fibre, more and more hysterical and spasmodic, more inordinate in grimace and snarl, a creature not much unlike the Louis XI. whom Mr. Irving has given us. In short, the heroic element, the potency of physique

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and will, the solid force of nature, which might be exhibited without suppressing Macbeth's vivacity, nervousness, and imaginative sensitiveness, suffered a total eclipse.

Such a scheme of the character may be defended on one line of reasoning and supported by citations here and there from the text of the tragedy. But an unprejudiced critic will surmise that the *causa causans* of what must be pronounced an inadequate and un-Shakespearean conception is in the operation of the actor's subconsciousness of limitations which disqualify him for the portrayal of the part on a more robust plan. Precedents and parallels are common of like mental processes in other actors and, indeed, in artists in all the arts. There is seldom any insincerity in such cases: the "sub" which modifies the consciousness clears the theorist of the charge of untruthfulness; he is really not aware that his knowledge of his

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own powers is the chief factor of his æsthetic judgments.

Mr. Irving's delivery of the text of *Macbeth* was often inadequate. The greatest passages were generally the greatest sufferers. The vast potencies of such lines as the incomparable five which begin, —

“What hands are here! ha! they pluck out mine eyes,”

were melted into commonplace under his tongue. On the other hand, the meaner side of the part was frequently made very vivid; and some sombre descriptive lines such as

“Ere the bat hath flown
His cloister'd flight, ere to black Hecate's summons
The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums
Hath rung night's yawning peal,”

and

“Light thickens; and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood:
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse;
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse,”

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were so delivered as darkly to haunt the secret places of the memory as some sombre winged things haunt the recesses of caves.

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